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# Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

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Chair: Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg





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• (1545)

[*English*]

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

Welcome to meeting number 67 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted on Monday, October 3, 2022, the committee is resuming its study on the experience of women veterans.

[*Translation*]

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, and members, like witnesses, are attending in person in the room and remotely using the Zoom application.

To ensure an orderly meeting, I would ask you to wait until I recognize you by name.

You have the interpretation online. You can choose English, French or the floor to hear what is being said here.

As you know, this room is equipped with a fairly efficient audio system, but we must be careful during the meeting not to cause hearing damage to our interpreters. While you are speaking, please avoid having the earphones too close to the mike to avoid interrupting the interpretation and to protect the hearing of our interpreters.

As a reminder, all comments should be addressed through the chair.

All the connection tests have been done.

I also have to give a warning about psychological trauma, given the study we are conducting.

Before welcoming our witnesses, I would like to give you a warning. We'll be discussing experiences related to mental health, which may be triggering to the people here with us, viewers, members and their staff with similar experiences. If you feel distressed or need help, please advise the clerk know.

[*English*]

For today, we have with us people from the sexual misconduct support and resource centre from DND. If you need anything, go to the clerk and those people who are with us.

Thank you for being here.

[*Translation*]

Before we welcome our witnesses—we have one here and two online—I have one more piece of business.

[*English*]

I would like to take just one minute to make a proposition to the committee as the chair. There will be no discussion really, or you can come to me.

During the special study that we are doing on veteran women, as you can see we have a trigger warning. This is the first time we are doing this kind of study. The study is important for women veterans and for us. However, I've heard from colleagues and witnesses since the last meeting that some of the women veterans are unwilling to come and testify because they said they feel like they were used or dismissed.

It is my duty to inform members of the committee that I have instructed the clerk to organize as soon as possible a session of two hours of training on trauma. It's free training that will help us know how to behave with people dealing with trauma, whether it's PTSD or not.

• (1550)

[*Translation*]

It's important for veterans who come to testify to feel comfortable reporting on the extremely difficult situations they have experienced. They are very courageous to come and testify here, in front of us and in front of the cameras. From the start of this study, we have taken steps to support them specifically when they participate in this committee.

[*English*]

I'd like to know if I have unanimous consent of the members of the committee to do that training as soon as possible.

**Some hon. members:** Agreed.

**The Chair:** Thank you so much.

Now I am pleased to welcome the witnesses we have here today, appearing as individuals. They are all women veterans.

We have Alice Aiken, a veteran, vice-president research and innovation, Dalhousie University, by video conference.

We have Nicole Langlois, a veteran.

[Translation]

She is joining us in person and will have to leave around 5:00 p.m. A number of members are also telling us that they would like the meeting to be over at 5:30 p.m.

[English]

By video conference we have Brigitte Laverdure, who is a veteran.

[Translation]

Ms. Langlois, you will have the honour to begin. Your speaking time will be timed, and I'll let you know when you have one minute left.

You have the floor for five minutes.

[English]

**Ms. Nicole Langlois (Veteran, As an Individual):** Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, committee.

My name is Nicole Langlois and I am a retired bombardier. I served seven years in the reserve army with the field artillery, from 1990 to 1997.

My military highlights include numerous combat courses and exercises with the 78th Field Battery, 20 RCA; and with the RCA battle school out in Shilo, with 1 RCHA and 2 PPCLI. My second highlight was deployment with the UN/NATO forces in 1992, with 1 RCHA. I served as a peacekeeper in Rural Battery at the observation post of the Canadian contingent zone. This deployment was the first time females directly served a frontline role. I trained to go to the former Yugoslavia with 1 RCHA in 1995, but the deployment was cancelled. I did pre-deployment training with 2 PPCLI. I became an M113 tracked vehicle operator.

During this time, I experienced barriers that no one should ever have to go through. Examples of my barriers include physical and mental barriers.

While training for the M113 tracked vehicle operation, I was regularly required to move, carry and manipulate items many times heavier than should be safely handled by any one person of my gender or physical stature. There was no safety equipment for back support or eyes, and there was minimal hearing protection. I used a three-foot pry bar and, without assistance, torqued an entire track as the instructors berated me about my supposed inadequacies in being a tracked vehicle operator. The nature of the work, the conditions in which it was performed, and the approach the instructors took were unsafe and abusive.

This kind of treatment undermined the Canadian Armed Forces' official position of inclusion for female soldiers in combat positions. It demonstrated a desire by many male soldiers to shift women out of those formerly male-only occupations and relegate them to support positions. I want to note that I did complete my M113 course.

During my time in service, I never reached out for help for physical injuries or mental health issues. Asking for help was frowned upon. It was a sign of weakness. I felt that I would be let go if I admitted to hurting.

I had barriers because I am a woman and a mother. I experienced verbal abuse behaviour, which caused mental stress. Few female soldiers at the time had the support of fellow peers and superior officers. Women were seen by many as objects or lesser people. Sexual harassment and displays of pornography in mixed company were commonplace. I heard, but have no formal proof, that some of my superiors did not wish to retain me because of my gender and parental status. Being a single parent, especially a female, in a combat arms trade in that era was not as well supported then as it is currently.

I believe that I was a good soldier and diligent in my duties. I am sure that the lack of respect and support by both regiments due to my gender and parental status helped to compound my PTSD, which I experienced and still suffer from.

I was a single mother in the military, which was very challenging. Becoming a mother played a huge role in my life. I felt I had to choose between the military or being a mom. Finally, I decided that being a mom was more important. Looking back at this decision, it is apparent that some of my supervisors navigated me to feel that I needed to choose between service or motherhood.

After retiring from the military, I found that all of my training was primarily for male-oriented jobs. There were many low points when I questioned my purpose in life. I asked myself what I wanted to do with my life. I looked inside myself mentally, and all I could see was that I had a military background. Who's going to hire someone who is a combat veteran?

I found a civilian job as a substitute teacher while I lived in New Hampshire. I had no formal education training, like a bachelor of arts with education. The school looked at my military qualifications and said, she's got leadership skills. They also saw leadership in my being a mother. For once, being ex-military was a positive.

I have worked at various other jobs, such as a school bus operator, sports coach, security guard, custodian and guest speaker. However, the results of my military service hinder my life.

● (1555)

During the last two and a half decades, I didn't realize I needed help, mentally and physically, from my time in the combat arms trade of the military.

My UN tour in Cyprus left me with lasting physical and emotional damage. I was hospitalized due to a back injury, and at one point I injured my knee as well. Both injuries still plague me today. Experiences in Cyprus also contributed to my lasting PTSD.

My pride made it difficult to talk to anyone, as I had the stigma against a soldier admitting weakness, but I sought psychological treatment when I felt completely defeated. Unfortunately, the professionals helping me had no experience with retired soldiers. Because of this, I was misdiagnosed and never received proper treatment for my PTSD.

In 2018, I was at my wits' end and called VAC to see if there was proper help for my physical injuries and mental damage from my time in the military.

The physical treatments I received started with rehabilitation to attempt to bring my body back to normal for my age. However, there are some long-term physical injuries that no rehab is able to repair. Since then, VAC has sent me to a doctor to help with my back injuries and pain management. Currently, all of those treatments are on hold as I fight cancer.

I spent many years after leaving the military having anxiety and depression and being unable to relax. Even now, I feel that I should be on alert for something that I think should happen but never does. I feel edgy and like there's a void in my life, but I also feel I won't be taken seriously. I still feel like I'm struggling on and immersed in bad memories that don't fade.

VAC connected me with a mental health professional who has diagnosed me with PTSD. My treatment has included medication, therapy and peer support groups. The peer support groups have been particularly helpful for me.

With regard to long-term prospects for my case, at my age I should still be working, but with my physical and mental injuries, I am unable to work. VAC is finally now realizing that and is helping me.

On my thoughts for potentially improving the situation of women in service today, there are three quick thoughts: advertising available veterans services that specifically target female veterans; using training to combat the stigma against veterans seeking help; and delivering training to all military and veterans as a way of targeting the commonly held beliefs about mental health within the military population.

An excellent study was done in the U.K., entitled "Exploring Barriers to Mental Health Treatment in the Female Veteran Population: A Qualitative Study". There's a link, so you guys can go there.

I have also included a letter from three male veterans who are still friends with me today, who corroborate my experience. You have read them already.

Thank you, Mr. Chair, and the committee.

• (1600)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Langlois, for your courageous testimony.

Members of the committee, I understand that we took more than five minutes, but I didn't want to interrupt.

**Ms. Nicole Langlois:** I know. I apologize.

**The Chair:** That's no problem at all.

[Translation]

I would now like to invite Dr. Alice Aiken, a veteran and vice-president of research and innovation at Dalhousie University, by videoconference.

Dr. Aiken, the floor is yours.

**Dr. Alice Aiken (Veteran, Vice-President Research and Innovation, Dalhousie University, As an Individual):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

[English]

Thank you for inviting me to be here today.

My name is Alice Aiken. I served in the Canadian navy, first in the naval reserve and then in the regular force, from 1984 until 1998. When I got out of the military, I was a naval lieutenant.

When I was in the reserve, I was in the first class of women who were allowed to go through navigation training. I was called a MARS officer, maritime service. We were the first ones through as a class to learn to navigate ships. I worked full-time as a reservist after that, through the first Gulf War, at headquarters here in Halifax.

Following that, I went back to university to become a physiotherapist, and then I joined the regular force at that time, and the military paid for my education at Dalhousie. I was then posted to Kingston from 1994 to 1998 as a physiotherapist, first at RMC and then at the main base. I was the head of physiotherapy.

When I retired, I worked clinically full time and did a master's and Ph.D. part time at Queen's University. I became a faculty member in 2006 and, very shortly after that, worked with a group of people and was the original founder and first scientific director of the Canadian Institute for Military and Veteran Health Research.

Through my time in the military, I saw a lot of injury. I'll talk about my own experiences in a moment, but I saw a lot of injury, mistreatment and mental health issues, and it was my way, through research, to give back. I am really proud to say that the institute carries on today. It's a network of 46 Canadian universities and 13 international partners that research military, veteran and family health.

I moved on from the institute but not from the research. I still research in the area and, in fact, with one of my research teams, I have done a very in-depth research project into the data presented in the Deschamps report.

I do epidemiology work. I understand a lot about different physical health presentations between male and female veterans, so if that is of any use to this committee, I am happy to talk about that research as well. It is my research world.

When I was in the military, with that dichotomy, I got a lot of good out of the military. I learned how to be a great leader. I was offered responsibility at a very young age, especially being an officer, but it came with a downside as well. Going through navigation training, we often heard, “You’re only passing because you’re a woman.” We heard misogynistic comments or sexist comments. You really could not walk into the mess on a Friday night without sexist comments being made to you, and there were misogynistic comments in the workplace or being called “dear” by someone who was subordinate to you, or all of those things.

I will say that I had some unpleasant experiences, but I’m a pretty forthright person, and I was able to tackle them head-on. I think when you call out bad behaviour—and I was in a position to be able to do that as an officer—often it helps.

I will say that it leaves a mark. When they started a class action lawsuit, I became part of that suit because I wanted to tell my story and I wanted the military to be different for other people, because there are good things that come out of serving in the military, things that I greatly appreciate to this day. Many of my friends whom I see regularly are friends I met in the military, and we appreciate what we learned.

I will say that I’ve been a bit disappointed with the process around the inquiry. There seemed to be lots of money but very little support. Really, I became part of the suit because I wanted to tell my story, and I keep getting notes saying, “Well, we have to talk to 20,000 of you, and they’re on number 438.” It’s unacceptable, as far as I’m concerned.

Thank you for inviting me here.

• (1605)

**The Chair:** Thank you very much for your testimony.

[*Translation*]

We now welcome Brigitte Laverdure, by videoconference.

Ms. Laverdure, you have five minutes.

**Ms. Brigitte Laverdure (Veteran, As an Individual):** Good morning, Mr. Chair, ladies and gentlemen members of the committee.

I would like to thank you for inviting me to appear before the committee.

My 17-year military career was fraught with quite traumatic events, and they still have an effect on my daily life. However, over the years, I have learned some ways to manage these symptoms.

Today, in 2023, 43 years later, I am reliving the sexual assault I experienced during my basic training in Saint-Jean. This assault was not committed by a platoon colleague, but by a senior officer, who knew full well that I would not speak out for fear of being fired from the Canadian Armed Forces. At that time, I was 17 years old. I had to face the demons of silence and agree to be just a face

to this predator. I was able to find the strength and courage not to give up my dream of becoming an airframe technician and to pursue this fine career.

Unfortunately, since November 2017, I have been in the whirlwind of the sexual misconduct class action lawsuit at the Department of National Defence. I am also trying to have this event recognized in my Veterans Affairs Canada file, which is still under appeal to VRAB, the Veterans Review and Appeal Board.

Since my file was in the media, my post-traumatic stress disorder has seriously worsened.

On May 24, 1986, I was faced with the death of Captain Tristan De Koninck when he crashed with, his F-18, on the base in Summerside, Prince Edward Island. As part of the base defence team, my duty was to retrieve the pilot and the aircraft parts. Need I mention that it isn’t normal for anyone to recover human remains? I was young, and I thought that was part of my job. We had no psychological support and no medical follow-up.

On November 14, 1988, in Bagotville, Quebec, I feared for my life. I was suddenly thrown 75 feet into the air when a T-33 pilot, in preparation for the runway, made a wrong manoeuvre; I got the jet blast in my back. I had to undergo surgery on my left knee as a result of that incident. If I hadn’t worn the proper winter clothing, part of my body would have been burned. Once again, no psychological support was offered to me, and no incident report was written against the pilot, because the pilot did not abort the start up in any way.

After several years of working in administrative positions, given my physical condition, in other words, my left knee, and undergoing job evaluations, I was downgraded and medically released. I felt like an old rag sent to the garbage after being dirtied. My release from the forces was miserable, and I felt alone in the process. Since then, I have always had to fight the system to have my health recognized at Veterans Affairs Canada. I felt like no one listened to me because I was a woman in a non-traditional trade, and I didn’t have to be there.

In conclusion, I believe that there is no proactive attitude at the Department of National Defence or Veterans Affairs Canada when an individual undergoes trauma in the line of duty. For more than 10 years, I’ve been helping individuals, before or after they leave the armed forces. The majority of them don’t even know that they’re entitled to the services and care of Veterans Affairs Canada.

In closing, I would like to thank my psychiatrist, Dr. Hugues Poirier, for his support. In fact, since the sexual misconduct file was opened, he alone has been concerned about my psychological state, which is very fragile.

Thank you for your time.

• (1610)

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Ms. Laverdure.

Thank you to all three of you for your testimony, your courage and your service. People say that from time to time, but I want you to know that it's sincere when we say it.

Before continuing, I would like to acknowledge the presence of a few substitutes who are here today.

[English]

We have MP Hanley, who is replacing MP Miao. On the web, we have MP Shanahan for MP Casey for 45 minutes.

We will now start a round with four questioners. They have six minutes each.

I would like to start with Mrs. Cathay Wagantall for six minutes.

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

First of all, I want to mention a very brief story.

My husband and I took some counselling as a young couple. When the individual talked about how women are fine china teacups, my husband leaned over and said, "Cathay, you are the most beautiful Pyrex mug I have ever met." I want to say today that I feel like a teacup in your presence. It's an honour to be here in the room. I thank you for contributing today. You're very brave, so I appreciate your being here so much.

I will start with Nicole. So many little portions of your sentences stood out to me.

First of all, you talked about leadership. They recognized your leadership in being a mother. I want to commend that. There's nothing better. For you to go through what you have and to care as a mother is significant, so thank you.

You said you sensed there was a desire to shift women out. We need to come to the foundation of why all of this suffering has taken place for women who have joined. It seems to me that they were thrown in without any thought, organization or consideration.

Do you have more you would like to say to that?

**Ms. Nicole Langlois:** At the time I served, at the beginning, I just wanted to be a soldier. I wanted to be equal. I didn't realize the more political ramifications. There was a soft entry back in the late 1980s, when they got in—when it became official that females were allowed in the combat arms. I wanted a challenge.

I accomplished what I could. I was trying to make this my full career, but when it's male-dominated in the combat arms.... I had to push twofold on that.

• (1615)

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** Exactly. That's understood. Thank you so much.

You indicated it was not as well supported then as it is now.

Do you sense anything improving? Is that where that's coming from? What makes you feel that way?

**Ms. Nicole Langlois:** I feel...not personally, but I have friends who are currently serving. They're saying it's very challenging. It is trying to break free, but it probably won't happen in my lifetime.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** Therefore, it's on the backs of the women who are enrolling to deal with this, in order to make things better.

**Ms. Nicole Langlois:** Yes. We're still a small percentage, whether it's combat arms or not, because there's support that supports the combat arms. It's a small percentage. It's not much bigger than it was when I joined 32 years ago.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** Thank you so much. I appreciate that.

I would like to ask this of Ms. Aiken: You talked about wanting to share your story. You said you don't know at what point in time.... Only 438 of the 20,000 who requested have been able to share their story, and this is not appropriate.

Can you explain to me how you think we can do a better job of making sure that all those stories are on record? How would you like to present your story?

**Dr. Alice Aiken:** I was a bit surprised when the class action suit came out.

First of all, I do have a very close group of seven women. We all went through navy training together; none of us stayed in. We're very close, to this day. We all said, "Let's become part of the suit to tell our story." You couldn't just do that. Part of the class action suit was that you couldn't just tell your story. You had to put in for a claim.

We said we'd do that, but it's not what we wanted. Only five of us were able to put in our stories; two were not able to. The two went to counselling, because it was very traumatic for them to think about their time in. I'm the only one who has been updated.

I'm not sure why the military would have started this process if it wasn't ready with, I don't know, thousands of counsellors on hand to take people's stories. It just seems to me to be really bad planning and—

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** Thank you.

I'm sorry. I just have a little time left. If you want to flesh that out in a statement, I would appreciate getting a better sense of that, because it needs to be done properly to give every woman her opportunity to share.

Do I have a bit of time left?

**The Chair:** You have 45 seconds.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** Ms. Laverdure, you talk very openly and bravely about the circumstances that you have lived through. I thank you for that.

You talk about your involvement on the veterans ombud advisory council. Are you sitting on that advisory council now?

**Ms. Brigitte Laverdure:** Yes, I am. I'm with the ombudsman until 2025.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** Can you explain to us a little of what you do on that council?

**Ms. Brigitte Laverdure:** We try to bring ideas together. The ombudsman made the group smaller. There were a lot of people on that council, and there are only eight of us now.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** Is that better?

**Ms. Brigitte Laverdure:** We sit down, we look at reports and we bring ideas. She makes the decisions.

**The Chair:** I'm sorry, the time is over. Thank you, Mrs. Wagantall.

Now I'd like to invite Mr. Randeep Sarai, for six minutes, please.

**Mr. Randeep Sarai (Surrey Centre, Lib.):** Thank you.

I want to first thank all three witnesses for coming and sharing your stories. It is very heartfelt to hear. All of you seem to be trailblazers and veterans in the sense of being among the first to go in your respective fields—whether it's in the navy, the army or artillery. It seems like you were plugged in as a policy, but without enough amendments made to make it appropriate for where you were supposed to be.

We now look at it and think of a gender-based analysis plus, but it doesn't seem like that was talked about back then. If it's ever imperative, I think hearing you and your testimonies demonstrates that this needs to be done in every government policy and every implementation of anything, including the armed forces.

I want to first say thank you, Ms. Langlois, for your service. I know it's pretty difficult to be here to talk about your experience. It's also remarkable how much you've been able to do as a mother and being in the military at the same time. It's important for our study to know what you're doing.

We really need to continue our work to improve programs and services for all veterans, especially for women veterans.

In your experience, what are the main issues that women veterans are facing when transitioning to civilian life?

You touched on it a bit. Some people gave you a break in terms of respecting your leadership skills and gave you a chance at being a teacher.

What are the other challenges that specifically women veterans face when transitioning to civilian life?

• (1620)

**Ms. Nicole Langlois:** At the time, in 1997, when I got out, I almost felt like I had just disappeared. I was very fortunate, though. I was a full-time mother. Not many people, obviously, could do that, but that was what I was doing.

If I had gone back to the workforce, I think it would have been a challenge, because of what I got experience in during my career in

the military. Civilian jobs and .50 cal.... I was qualified in a lot of infantry courses, artillery, so I didn't know what I would be doing.

I looked at it that way, but with the teacher education, when she asked me that question and told me that, I was like, "Wow, okay. I do have that responsibility to do that."

**Mr. Randeep Sarai:** What you mean to say is that it would be helpful, for example, to get credentials, a certificate or something tangible that would show the skills that you learned other than a .50 calibre. That might not be.... There are very few career choices that you can use to demonstrate that, but you could use those other skills to help you get other jobs or training, or, if you trained people in the military, you could become an instructor, because you've done that before.

Would that be a better way, whereby you can get tangibly, on paper, have something you can show an employer when you get out to the real world? We're honestly trying to figure this out, so that we can help future veterans transition from CAF into civilian service.

**Ms. Nicole Langlois:** That's right. Yes. What I said in my paper was those ideas, yes. Thank you.

**Mr. Randeep Sarai:** Thank you, Ms. Langlois.

I'll go to Ms. Aiken.

I think your research focused on health system transformation, as well as evidence-informed policy-making. What is your input on how the government can better adapt its benefits and program delivery systems to be more inclusive regarding women veterans?

**Dr. Alice Aiken:** Veterans Affairs has actually done, I think, quite a bit of work in that regard. I suffered two physical injuries while I was in. I'm a client of Veterans Affairs, and I'm under the old Pension Act. When the new veterans charter came in, they made some improvements around programming that was more accessible to veterans and might have benefited my colleagues on this call around education and things like that, and then actually counselling around education, which was great too.

Another thing they've done recently that I think is very important as well is that if a veteran is a seriously injured veteran and can't use the benefits, those are available for their family, which benefits predominantly women generally, I'd say, because we still see that 86% of the people serving in the military are men.

I believe there has been some progress made with Veterans Affairs. With National Defence it's a tougher call. It's a male-dominated area.



I had two friends who taught SHARP training. That was the original sexual harassment and racism prevention training back in the late eighties and early nineties. They are very traumatized from that, from how they were treated. I'm not sure.... You have to educate people. I don't know how you do a better job of it. We still see examples all the time of people misbehaving and the culture not changing, so I'm afraid that I don't have a great solution for the military, though I do think about it a lot.

I do think that Veterans Affairs has made some progress.

• (1625)

**Mr. Randeep Sarai:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

I'll now give the floor to Luc Desilets for the next six minutes.

**Mr. Luc Desilets (Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, BQ):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank all three of you for being here and for your service.

We started this study weeks ago. I don't know if I'm becoming more and more sensitive, but, my goodness, what we're hearing here is huge and appalling. Even though I understand what a war is, I really have a hard time accepting the collateral damage experienced by men, and by women in particular. I leave this meeting, and I'm in a bubble, and yet I'm only an observer outside of all that. So I want to express all the respect I have for all three of you.

Before I begin, I must also tell you that I will soon be asking my colleagues to debate a motion that I proposed some time ago and that is aimed at highlighting the work done by veterans during the Afghanistan mission. We absolutely have to deal with this. I'm going to ask my colleagues not to ramble so that we can get right to the heart of the motion and avoid what we went through last week. Furthermore, if someone moves the vote quickly, I will be very happy, even if my motion is defeated.

**The Chair:** Mr. Desilets, I'm stopping the clock to remind you that we have set aside 10 or 15 minutes at the end of the meeting for a discussion. That might be an opportunity to put forward—

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** I could propose it then. Will the witnesses still be here?

**The Chair:** The witnesses will be able to stay, no problem.

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** My goodness, I'm happy! Thank you very much.

My first question is for you, Ms. Laverdure.

It's good to see you here again. We've had many opportunities to talk in the past. You have an extraordinary pedigree and experience.

In one of your testimonies, one thing struck me terribly, and that's the fact that you continue to help veterans, especially with the darn paperwork. You help them fill out the forms so they can receive services. You told us that, when the request was in English—the language you used—the response was much quicker.

What about applications made by women? Based on the figures, we can see that it's still taking longer to respond to women's requests than to those of men.

Is that your understanding as well?

**Ms. Brigitte Laverdure:** Yes, it's always longer.

I don't know if you've read the latest report by Nishika Jardine, our ombud. According to the report, there's still a great deal of discrimination against women in the processing of claims for compensation or for programs at Veterans Affairs Canada. In the 2022 report, that is still the case.

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** How do you explain this difference in processing between applications from men and women? What do you think the reasons are for that?

**Ms. Brigitte Laverdure:** As I mentioned in my opening remarks, there is a mindset, both at the Department of National Defence and at Veterans Affairs Canada, that women have no place in the Canadian Forces.

I joined the forces in 1980 as an airframe technician. The trade had just been created in 1979. I was one of the 1% of women who started in this trade.

When you arrive, you have all kinds of problems, and there were allowances. Still, it was as if I didn't even have the right to be there. That's their mentality.

• (1630)

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** You're clearly telling me that women and men are treated differently. Is it as ridiculous as that?

**Ms. Brigitte Laverdure:** Yes, and it's even more true in the case of francophones.

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** It's even worse for francophone women.

**Ms. Brigitte Laverdure:** Yes. I deal with a lot of francophone veterans in Quebec. I certainly don't meet any outside Quebec. There's no doubt that a female veteran who leaves the forces and has to apply for benefits under Veterans Affairs Canada programs will come after a male veteran.

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** That's the situation in 2023.

**Ms. Brigitte Laverdure:** Yes, in 2023. I've experienced it myself.

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** Have you experienced it recently?

**Ms. Brigitte Laverdure:** I'm still living it. In 2023, I saw men appeal decisions to VRAB in Charlottetown. Last month, I even met with VRAB representatives in Charlottetown. I asked them why my file had been dragging on for nearly three years.

It seems that the system makes women seem of lesser importance because they haven't suffered as much as men in their service. That's the mindset.

There are now a lot of ex-servicemen in Charlottetown and in leadership at Veterans Affairs Canada. When we bring up certain issues, we're told that it was up to us not to be there. Some are more sensitive than others to our problems, but the majority feel that way, and there are more and more of them.

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** One of the potential solutions you are proposing is that the department hire women to support women.

**Ms. Brigitte Laverdure:** Yes, absolutely.

Having said that, there's so much more to it than that. We're talking about Veterans Affairs Canada, but we should also be talking about the Department of National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces transition system. When a person has to leave the military for medical reasons, their file is shelved for three years.

**The Chair:** Thank you for your intervention, Ms. Laverdure.

Thank you, Mr. Desilets.

[*English*]

I'll now turn the microphone to Ms. Rachel Blaney for six minutes, please.

The floor is yours.

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

I want to thank our witnesses today for their incredible bravery and for their service.

I think it is important to recognize that when you're part of the first cohort walking into anything, it is incredibly brave to do that work, and it's very clear that nobody really prepared for it. There was no sort of orientation, saying, "This is going to be hard," and there was no accountability put on the people who were receiving to make sure that the pathway was as safe as possible, so thank you for being here to help us try to make the path safer for other veterans who are women and for other serving women members in the future.

What I heard from all three of your testimonies.... I'm going to ask one question. I'll start with you, Nicole, and then move on to the other folks online about this.

What I heard in all of your testimony is that because of the fact that you were often silenced and there was a lack of confidence that if you came and told someone, that reality would be reflected back to you in a positive way, and because you were in an environment where it was very much "just get through it", even though you were doing things that anybody of your physical stature would struggle with.... It was all very normal, but it was treated like it was some sort of bad thing. With the sexual assaults that we heard about from some of our witnesses today, it was just like this abuse that was happening, in that you were not able to share it.

I know that when you get over to the VAC side, if you have things not documented, it's very hard to get the supports that you need. I'm just wondering if you could tell us about that challenge and how you were made to be silent—forced to be silent. When you then got to the VAC side, how did you have to try to get them to understand, so that you could get what you needed to heal?

• (1635)

**Ms. Nicole Langlois:** I'm still fighting for that, because they want proof of my injury. Even then, when I had that back injury, I had to have an advocate fight for me and go digging, because VAC wasn't willing to give anything up.

We have to ask, but there are things I don't even know, and how am I supposed to ask if I don't know things and ask the right questions? I'm just finally getting...my husband's helping me out, and there's a form, but he's not my nurse; he's my caregiver.

I'm finally getting help with that. I have the appropriate care manager from VAC now, because now I'm going through a life-altering moment. It's a long moment.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** Thank you so much.

If I could, I'll come to you, Dr. Aiken.

**Dr. Alice Aiken:** No problem.

I'd agree. When I was released in 1998.... I don't know if Nicole had the same experience, but at the base in Kingston, somebody actually sat down with me, went through my medical file and said, "Okay, you had these injuries. We're going to put in a claim to Veterans Affairs. We're going to help you with it." I know that in 2007, when my husband was released, they didn't do that anymore. They put in a claim, and I thought, "Oh, that is great service," but it took years of going through Veterans Affairs, and people were questioning me.

Keep in mind that at this time, I was a health professional, and they were questioning me, asking just ridiculous questions about anatomy and things they didn't even understand. I had to sit in front of a tribunal and justify how I had hurt myself. Well, I fell and I hurt myself. Why did I have to justify that? I filled out a CF 98. I did all of the right things. It was an absolute nightmare, and we went through the same nightmare trying to get my husband's claim.

I'm not sure it was any different for men or women, though he had served longer and was army. I was navy, so that was also a different thing.

I have to say the whole process was terrible at the time. Now, should you wish to add anything else to your claim—because we know most veterans don't come forward with claims until 15 years after they've released—they stop your entire file until it's adjudicated, which makes zero sense.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** Thank you.

If I can come to you, Ms. Laverdure, your story, in particular, was around having that terrible, violent throw of 75 feet, if I have that correctly.

I'm wondering if that was recorded appropriately, so that you could actually claim when you got to VAC?

**Ms. Brigitte Laverdure:** Again, this was one of my fights, because the accident happened in 1988 at Bagotville. Following the accident, I had a surgery done at Valcartier in Quebec, the military base, so everything was documented in my files.

When I put in a claim at VAC for the deconditioning of my left knee, they refused, but I had the surgery in the military. Then I had to look for my warrant officer at that time, who had picked me up off the tarmac, and ask him to write a letter to testify how I was injured there. Then they accepted, but it took five years.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** Thank you. I think that's my time.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Blaney. That's really good; it's exactly six minutes. I know that you have your own chrono with you, and I think it's a good idea to have that with us.

Now we're going to start a second round of questions. I'll start with Mr. Richards for five minutes, please.

• (1640)

**Mr. Blake Richards (Banff—Airdrie, CPC):** Thanks, Mr. Chair. First of all, I want to thank each of you, not only for your service to our country but also for your courage in being here today to share your stories. I know that it can't be easy, and we all certainly appreciate and recognize that. We really appreciate your being here to do that, despite how difficult I know it can be.

Nicole, I'd like to ask you first. I'm going to go to a completely different topic here. My understanding is that you work with Quilts of Valour.

**Ms. Nicole Langlois:** I did.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** You did. Let me ask you about it. It sounds like there may be a bit of story there—I don't know.

One of the things that often strike me is that many times, when a veteran leaves the service, one of the things that are important is to still have that sense of fulfillment in serving, to still have that in your life. Many veterans choose to do that by serving other veterans. My understanding of that organization is that that's obviously what it's about: trying to provide comfort for veterans.

I wonder if you could share with us that experience. Was that what that was about for you? Is that something that you find important, and is there something that Veterans Affairs can be doing to encourage more of that service to fellow veterans amongst veterans?

**Ms. Nicole Langlois:** That's a very great end result: presenting a quilt to a fellow veteran. That was my calling at that time, and I presented many of them, especially during COVID times. It was emotional, but presenting them with a quilt of valour and then hearing them...and then being on the same veteran to veteran.... When I received mine, as well.... It's emotional, and it's more acceptable when you're a fellow veteran rather than a non-veteran. When they're presented by a non-veteran—a civilian—to a veteran, then they don't open as much.... A lot of veterans don't want the attention. That's what I didn't want; I didn't want the attention. I wanted it very low-key: Present it to me, and we'll have a root beer and go from there.

It meant a lot, but I saw other avenues that I needed to go down.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** I can appreciate that. I guess it's that aspect of serving a veteran that I was wanting to probe a little further.

Can you tell me...? It sounds like that's an important thing for you. I know it is for many veterans I've spoken to. It's an important aspect of post-military service.

Are there any suggestions you might have on that in terms of something that Veterans Affairs could do to encourage more of that, to enable more of that, to make it easier for veterans to serve their fellow veterans?

If you don't have anything, it's fine, but if you do, I'd love to hear it.

**Ms. Nicole Langlois:** Support groups would be nice to have. I belong to one. Even with the legion, if you go with other.... It's important, as well, to have support with them. I can probably answer it further on, down the line, on paper.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** That would be great. If you do have suggestions that come to mind even later on, please send them to our committee. I think you would have had correspondence with the clerk.

**Ms. Nicole Langlois:** Thank you.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** You can send it through the clerk. That's no problem.

Let me ask you something on another topic altogether. You served in the combat arms. It's often a male-dominated area of the military, obviously. Do you think there ought to be more special attention paid to women veterans who are serving in the more male-dominated areas? What would be your specific suggestion there, if you have one? Again, if you don't have anything to suggest right now, we can take it later.

**Ms. Nicole Langlois:** You're low. I can't hear.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** I'm sorry. I think it's difficult because I'm trying to look at you, and the microphone's pointing the other way.

• (1645)

**Ms. Nicole Langlois:** I know.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** I'll try to speak up. I was asking whether you have any specific suggestions on what can be done to pay more specific and special attention to women who are serving in the forces in those more male-dominated trades.

**Ms. Nicole Langlois:** I'm sorry. That question went right over my head.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** That's no problem. I'll tell you what: I have another one I'd like to ask.

**Ms. Nicole Langlois:** Okay.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** I probably have time for only one anyway.

What I want to ask about, ironically enough, is this: I know that many times, serving around artillery guns and whatnot, you can have hearing loss. I'm not suggesting that's what it is. I think I am the problem here. I don't know if you do suffer from any hearing loss, but I know that's a common injury in that trade.

**Ms. Nicole Langlois:** There was no evidence that I reported it. However, it did get approved. Hearing loss wasn't, but tinnitus was, just because of my field. I was in artillery.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** I'm out of time. I had a whole question around that, but I'm told it will have to wait.

Thank you for being here.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

Now let's go to Mr. Bryan May for five minutes.

Please go ahead.

**Mr. Bryan May (Cambridge, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to all of our witnesses for being here today. I know this is a very challenging conversation for all of you. This study is going to have an impact, not just for those who are coming to talk to us but really for us as well.

I used to chair this committee, and I also chaired HUMA during Bill C-65, which was the study on violence and harassment in the workforce that was done back in 2018. It's important for us to hear these stories. It's important for us to understand the challenges that still exist. I again sincerely thank all of you for being here and sharing with us.

My questions today are going to be for Ms. Laverdure. I want to thank you, as well as everyone here, for their service. I believe you've been advocating for the recognition of the rights of gay veterans and 2SLGBTQIA+ groups. I also want to thank you for your involvement with and support for these groups. I think it's really important, as a government, that we be significantly more inclusive, specifically within the CAF.

I have a lot of familiarity with the defence advisory groups, and I know there's a lot of work being done on bases across Canada. However, I specifically want to focus on the new Minister of Veterans Affairs, who said to this committee that inclusion and diversity are one of her main priorities. I would like to ask you what the main issues that women veterans and specifically those who are part of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community are facing when they transition into civilian life.

**Ms. Brigitte Laverdure:** If you go back a few years, even in my time, in 1990, when there was the purge, there was no transition for these people. They were kicked out. They were kicked out so badly that they didn't have a good release because they were gay.

Today, I don't think the problem has been resolved. We know a few women who are still in the military, and they're hiding. They don't want to come forward. It will take many years for this whole process to go through, but it's still not okay.

**Mr. Bryan May:** I have visited almost all of the bases across Canada over the last two years and, again, met with the DAGs, the defence advisory groups. I heard about the challenges they're dealing with regarding resources.

I'm wondering. In your opinion, how can programs like that, and others, be improved to better support women, and veterans specifically, and people within that community?

**Ms. Brigitte Laverdure:** I will speak for veterans—the ones who came out after this ordeal, the ones who got help from Veterans Affairs. I will speak for them.

These women, even the men.... There were a lot of gay men too. Veterans Affairs has to have support for them.

A couple of years ago, some went to Veterans Affairs to get help, and they were sent to OSISS. I don't know whether you have ever heard of OSISS. They were told that OSISS didn't support gay people.

• (1650)

**Mr. Bryan May:** Can you remind us what OSISS stands for?

**Ms. Brigitte Laverdure:** OSISS is an organization within National Defence for veterans who suffer from PTSD. It's all across Canada. OSISS is all across Canada.

I think OSISS is the name in English, but I don't know. We call it OSISS in French too.

**Ms. Nicole Langlois:** It's occupational stress injury.

**Ms. Brigitte Laverdure:** You have to be a veteran to be working within OSISS.

They wouldn't support the LGBTQ people.

**Mr. Bryan May:** Thank you.

I think that's my time.

**The Chair:** Exactly.

Thank you so much, Mr. May.

Now we will have two short interventions of two and a half minutes each.

[Translation]

I will begin right away with Mr. Desilets, for two and a half minutes.

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. May, with all due respect, we were on the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs together four years ago. You spoke of challenges, and I agree with you. That said, at some point, you start to know the challenges, and you know them even better than I do because you have more experience. We've been identifying the challenges for four years. For four years, we've been making recommendations in extraordinary, highly professional reports. However, the damn recommendations no matter how intelligent, are too often neither followed nor heeded. That was my little editorial piece.

Ms. Langlois, once again, thank you for your testimony.

I have a rather silly question for you. Do you think that, in order to prevent sexual assault or sexual harassment in the army, it might be appropriate, as part of the selection process for commanders, to have them undergo psychological assessments?

[English]

**Ms. Nicole Langlois:** If I could avoid it.... I didn't see it coming. When I did get approached by a lot of...it was in the workforce or even after hours. It still was coming.

Whatever happens overseas is supposed to stay quiet. I was one of over a hundred 1 RCHA members who went over to Cyprus. Everybody had to be quiet about that. I didn't want to lose my job.

[Translation]

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** Again, my question may be silly, but I'm a bit silly.

Do you think that, if units with a majority of women were formed, a lot of problems in the army would be avoided?

[English]

**Ms. Nicole Langlois:** It could be reassuring for us, but how long will that take to resolve in my lifetime?

[Translation]

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[English]

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Thank you, Ms. Langlois.

I'd like to invite, for two and a half minutes, Ms. Rachel Blaney.

Please go ahead.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Nicole, I'm going to come back to you.

You gave us three recommendations. One of them was to have available veteran services that specifically target female veterans.

What kinds of services do you think would have been beneficial for you while you were serving?

• (1655)

**Ms. Nicole Langlois:** To see what we just went through, either when I was serving with the UN...so they know. We needed to have a decompression, but it wasn't available for us at that time. I didn't even know there was...so why would I? I didn't know who to ask the question to, in order to call for help on that.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** Well, that makes a lot of sense. If you don't know what the services are, it's very hard to access them. Of course, if they had done that while you were serving, things would have been well documented and made a lot easier for you when you got to VAC.

In terms of having available veteran services that specifically target female veterans, as a veteran, what services do you think would be helpful that we don't have now?

**Ms. Nicole Langlois:** I'm getting help, so I'm trying to think of.... They need to have the right counsellors who understand the combat veteran, or the non-combat veteran. Psychologists need to help and have groups of like-minded people who have been through what I've been through....

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** I think that's an excellent answer. Thank you for that.

I want to say, in closing, that your endurance has been impressive. That's to all the witnesses today. I think it's a real testament to your strength. What I'm very sad about is this: When you were being stronger than most people ever have to be, you were being told the exact opposite.

Thank you for being here and explaining that to us, so we can better serve veterans.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

I know Ms. Langlois has to go, so I'd like to thank her on behalf of the members of the committee—and myself.

Thank you, Ms. Langlois, for coming to meet us at the committee.

The meeting is not over. We're going to continue. I'd like to go to—

**Ms. Nicole Langlois:** Thank you, Mr. Chair. Have a good meeting.

**The Chair:** It's my pleasure. Thank you. Have a good trip back.

I'd like to invite Mr. Fraser Tolmie for five minutes.

**Mr. Fraser Tolmie (Moose Jaw—Lake Centre—Lanigan, CPC):** Thank you.

As you're leaving, Nicole, I want to let you know that when you talked about pride, it was the bravest thing I've ever heard said in this committee. I know what that's like, and I appreciate your sharing that.

Dr. Aiken, there are a couple of questions I'd like to ask you.

In your opening statement, you mentioned SHARP training. It was in the eighties and nineties. I received it in the early 2000s.

For clarification, what I'd like to know is this: Are you saying it's outdated? Has it not been updated to reflect today's culture, or were you just referring to what you went through when you were going through your training?

**Dr. Alice Aiken:** This was the first iteration of SHARP training. Several of my friends were pulled in to teach it. It was developed at that time. I am certain it's been upgraded since then—at least, I would hope it has been.

I don't think any of the messaging was bad. I think we just have a better understanding now. What was very bad was how people reacted to it. They would typically have young female officers teach a room entirely of men who made sexualized or racist comments while they were there. It was so counterintuitive to how it should have been done at the time.

I would hope that by the time you received your training, it was better, and that people were more tolerant, because when it started, it was seen as a joke.

**Mr. Fraser Tolmie:** Thank you for that clarification. I appreciate that.

A couple of other statements you made were that you were proud of the skills you learned—your leadership skills—and of what the military taught you. What we find is there is a pivotal moment in the life of someone who is a veteran when they're upset because Veterans Affairs doesn't treat them the same way, and it tarnishes their military career. Could you expand on that or share a bit of insight with regard to your personal testimony?

• (1700)

**Dr. Alice Aiken:** Yes. I would say that when I released from service I did so for several reasons. They weren't going to post my husband and me together. I had a good job opportunity on the outside. There were a number of reasons for my releasing.

Despite women being treated differently, and overtly so, I still got out with an overwhelming sense that I'm super proud that I served, and I will tell you that still, to this day, but then you get into the Veterans Affairs cycle that just takes years and years. I had two documented accidents, and they're asking me all these ridiculous questions all the time. I keep going back: “No, no, no, we need a statement from an orthopaedic surgeon.” You have three of them; why do you need another one...? What are we doing here?

I had self-efficacy in the health system, and I kept getting calls from my former patients in the military who were beside themselves, just crying and saying, “I don't know how to deal with this system. I don't know what to do.” These were people who had served in long and distinguished careers, illustrious careers, and were basically thrown by the wayside.

I will say that I think things got somewhat better when Walt Natynczyk was in as the deputy minister, because he got it, but I agree with my colleague, Brigitte, that still a lot of the people working there are not female veterans. They're male veterans, and women's service is still seen as less. It still is. Nobody questions my husband about how he was a veteran, but they'll say to me, “Oh, were you really a veteran?”

**Mr. Fraser Tolmie:** Yes, and we covered this in our last meeting. I asked the question: Should there be more veterans serving in Veterans Affairs, because they understand? We're going from a military service where things are organized and structured to a civilian organization that takes over your files. Then you're treated like an insurance claim, and you have to prove everything. Would you agree with that?

**Dr. Alice Aiken:** Well, it is an insurance company, so yes, I would.

**Voices:** Oh, oh!

**Dr. Alice Aiken:** Yes, I definitely would agree with that.

I will say that I was actually on a committee for Veterans Affairs in 2006-07. It was to look at seriously injured veterans. It was chaired by Bruce Henwood. I'm sure that name is familiar to all of you. There were no veterans working at Veterans Affairs at that time, and that was one of our main recommendations.

**Mr. Fraser Tolmie:** Thank you.

I know that I have very little time.

Ms. Laverdure, I just wanted to know, was it 433 or 425 that you were serving with in Bagotville?

**Ms. Brigitte Laverdure:** It was 425.

**Mr. Fraser Tolmie:** Okay. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

[*English*]

Now I would like to invite the Honourable Carolyn Bennett to take her five minutes.

[*Translation*]

**Hon. Carolyn Bennett (Toronto—St. Paul's, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd also like to thank you for your excellent recommendation for training on trauma for all members of our committee, so that witnesses feel safer.

[*English*]

I think it's very wonderful, what you've done to make sure that never again do our people feel ignored or feel that a question was inappropriate. For all of us, how to do better on that, I think, will make this committee a much better place.

I too want to thank all the witnesses, not only for your service but for your courage and your commitment to doing better. I think this is what we need to do. We really need your advice in terms of the recommendations that should be in this report.

• (1705)

[*Translation*]

I believe that, for Ms. Laverdure, the recommendations will focus on support for LGBTQ2S rights.

[*English*]

Are there recommendations that you think would help better serve the community that you received the award for supporting? That usually means that they needed your support because they weren't getting it in other places.

I would love to know what you think could be done differently for the women who identify in that community, and then I can shut up.

Dr. Aiken, I love the idea that you and your husband, both veterans, are already doing a live trial as to what is different. I would love it if you would just tell us if the men are getting the same number of stupid questions. Is there a gender difference?

Then again, in all the scholarly work that you've done and with CIMVHR.... It looks like there are really good articles in the journal at CIMVHR about gender difference or women vets. Maybe some of the members of the committee would be interested to read them.

I was surprised to find that this really good journal wasn't on PubMed. How can we get it, so that someone who maybe doesn't even know the journal exists could find the really good work being done there when they're searching a topic?

Are there certain articles that you think should be part of our report in terms of the experience of women veterans and their families, their perinatal experience and all of the things that we know have to be there?

I'd love it if you both would tell us what you would want to see in the recommendations in terms of making sure that people are treated properly and not cross-examined about something that is patently clear.

**The Chair:** You have one minute each, please, to try to answer the question.

Let's start with Madame Laverdure.

**Ms. Brigitte Laverdure:** For the LGBTQ2+ veterans or those still serving, I would think that the government would have to put in a support group and let these people know there are groups that exist.

For the veterans, it will be pretty hard to go to these people, because they were hurt so badly. They went and got what they were capable of getting at Veterans Affairs, but in their service, whether it's when they joined or if they're still serving, they would have to be supported in a way that if they need anything, they will be supported.

That's basically the recommendation I would suggest.

**Dr. Alice Aiken:** I would say that my husband probably was asked as many ridiculous questions as I was. The difference is that I'm really mouthy, and he spent longer in the military and really believed the system would take care of him.

In the military you actually get great medical care. People in the military believe the system will take care of them, so when they come out, they're not always their own best advocates, and that is really problematic. Whether it's male, female or LGBTQ, people coming out of the military expect the system to take care of them, and Veterans Affairs does not act like that. It doesn't act like the military medical system, and that's something that could really help.

As for the journal, we started it in 2015. It is indexed on some sites, and we've been trying to get it indexed on PubMed.

If you go to the CIMVHR website, it's fully open access. You can access all the articles there and search anything you like. I would suggest that there are some fantastic articles in there that would help the committee.

• (1710)

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

Members of the committee, we have only eight minutes left. We can go four minutes and four minutes, or we can have two for each party. If you don't mind, we'll go two minutes and two minutes.

Okay, that's great.

I'd like to invite Mr. Dowdall for two minutes, please.

**Mr. Terry Dowdall (Simcoe—Grey, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair, but I'm going to cede my time to my colleague here, who really wants to ask some questions.

**The Chair:** Mrs. Wagantall, please go ahead.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** Thank you very much to my colleague. I appreciate that.

Tell me if I'm hearing this correctly. We often hear about the treatments available related to physical injuries, and there are challenges there, that's true, but can you talk to me about the mental trauma? I've heard what admitting weaknesses does to your mind. Downgraded, released or discharged, all of those impact your mental health. I've also heard the term "sanctuary trauma", where you're expecting to have that care but it doesn't seem to be there.

Of all those concerns, which one impacted you the most or impacts you the most in moving forward with your lives after service, or is it a combination? How does that work?

I will ask Alice and then Brigitte, please.

**Dr. Alice Aiken:** I didn't have a problem moving forward with my life. I would say that I've stayed intimately tied to the military because I want to see change. I devoted my entire research career to the military. I'm an honorary naval captain. I'm part of the Order of St. George. I really try to give back to the veteran community, because I want to see change.

Did it stop me moving forward in my life? It did not in any way. I think I've done fairly well for myself, and I do attribute some of that to the military. At the young age of 23 I was in charge of a whole group of men who had never had a female boss, and I was too young to think I couldn't do it.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** On that note, I just want to ask you this. Your situation is solid, and that's great. Can you think, from the perspective of boots on the ground, of individuals who would be more like the other witness who was here who—

Are you frozen? I think she is.

Can we move on to Brigitte, then, and maybe come back to her?

**The Chair:** You have 30 seconds, please, Madame Laverdure.

**Ms. Brigitte Laverdure:** Okay. I'll make it short.

When I released from the military, when I was kicked out because of my medical condition, it was for my knee, a physical condition. At that time, I didn't know that I had PTSD. I found out later that I had PTSD, because things were really bad in my life. That's when I went to VAC, because I was already with VAC for my knee. Then, again, I had to fight to prove that I suffered from accidents and a whole bunch of things.

It's pretty hard for somebody to come forward and say, "I think I have a mental condition."

**The Chair:** Thank you so much.

Mrs. Bennett, you have two minutes for a quick intervention, please.

**Hon. Carolyn Bennett:** I would love for them.... Whatever you haven't had time to say, please just jump in and finish whatever you need.

**Dr. Alice Aiken:** I would like to thank the committee for your work. Please don't underestimate the seriousness of the suffering of some of my sisters in arms. This is important work you're doing; it's not political. Please take it seriously.

**The Chair:** Thank you so much.

• (1715)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Laverdure, there's still a minute left, if you have something to add.

**Ms. Brigitte Laverdure:** As my colleague, I would like to thank you for your work, dear members. It's not a simple thing.

We're always going to have to fight for something. However, as I said earlier, the current problem affecting veterans, both men and women, has to do with transition. There has to be a better transition when they leave the Canadian Armed Forces. The people who work in transition centres across Canada are military members who may not even know that they have post-traumatic stress syndrome.

You need experienced people in transition centres across the country.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

Mr. Desilets, do you have a final comment?

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

One thing worries me. At every meeting, I see intelligent and educated people like you, leaders and solid people like you who, despite everything, find it difficult to make their way in this system.

I put myself in the shoes of people who are coming out of the army, returning from missions and having significant psychological difficulties. It must be hell, after going through hell.

Dr. Aiken, do you have any recommendations to add?

[*English*]

**Dr. Alice Aiken:** Perhaps I could give a recommendation. I mentioned that when I released from the military, somebody sat down with me and said that this was what they were going to submit to Veterans Affairs and they would help me get this done. The transition centres don't exactly do that.

As my colleague just said, they are people in the military, who might be struggling themselves. The person who helped me was a public servant, a civilian, who worked in the health system in the military. I really think that getting people there to help people make that transition to Veterans Affairs, if they need the help, would be a critical recommendation.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Desilets.

It's now Ms. Blaney's turn.

Go ahead, Ms. Blaney.

[*English*]

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** Thank you, Chair.

Ms. Laverdure, I will just come to you for one final question. You spoke earlier, with great honesty, about the fact that you're part of the class action suit, and that one of the challenges, if I understood correctly, is that because you're going through that process, your PTSD is really being triggered, and it's a lot harder.

I'm just wondering, when we think about the services from VAC, how that process to contact VAC could be easier when you're in such a vulnerable position.

**Ms. Brigitte Laverdure:** I don't think VAC cares about the people in the class action.

I was thrown from one person to the other. The reason I was thrown from one to the other was that I already had PTSD from my previous accidents and crash. Because I had PTSD already, I wasn't allowed anything in the class action.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** I hear what is not happening. What do you think would make it better?

**Ms. Brigitte Laverdure:** By "make it better", do you mean to go to the class action...?



**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** What I mean is how VAC could be more helpful. You've indicated very clearly that they were saying, "You're already diagnosed. Good enough. That's all you get," but you're being triggered. What would be more helpful?

I'm sorry that I have to ask these questions, but I actually need you to testify, so I can put it in the report.

**Ms. Brigitte Laverdure:** As I said, it's my psychiatrist who takes care of that. I sit with him; he writes it down, and he sends reports.

What could they do? They won't do anything differently from what they do with other PTSDs. They have a special team. When the class action opened, people who were in...questioning, could call them and ask what they had...but they didn't have a clue what to say to these people.

I know I called them once, and they told me I had to reassess my PTSD, so that's why I've been, for the past two years, reassessing my PTSD condition.

• (1720)

[Translation]

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Ms. Laverdure.

We will now move to committee business.

Witnesses, you're welcome to stay with us if you wish. We don't have much time, but if you have to leave, that's fine. I want to take this opportunity to thank you for your testimony and your courage.

We had with us, as an individual, Dr. Alice Aiken, who is a veteran and vice-president of research and innovation at Dalhousie University; Brigitte Laverdure, who is a veteran; and earlier we welcomed Nicole Langlois, who had to leave.

With that, we will go to committee business, and the public can stay as well.

Last time, I told you that we had a motion asking two ministers to appear for two hours. After all the work of the clerk of the committee, they will appear next Tuesday at 1:00 p.m.

So we can suggest that we invite other witnesses who are veterans. The second hour would be the study of the National Memorial on Canada's Mission in Afghanistan.

Since we weren't able to respond to the motion exactly, it's up to the members of the committee to decide what to do.

I'll turn it over to Mr. Richards.

[English]

**Mr. Blake Richards:** First, I was listening to the translation and it came through as Tuesday at one o'clock. I assume that was a mis-translation.

**The Chair:** No, no. It's not one o'clock. It is the hours of the committee, but one hour on the experience of women veterans and one hour with the two ministers.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** Okay, so do we know which hour is which?

**The Chair:** The ministers will be last, from five until six.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** Okay.

My only other comment would be that, obviously, the motion asked for two hours. I understand that when you're given a timeline, sometimes an hour is what ends up happening, but I don't think it's something we should just accept without some kind of indication that we have some disappointment that they aren't coming for the two hours requested.

I would ask that, on behalf of the committee, you write a letter to the two ministers, indicating our disappointment that they aren't fulfilling the two hours that was requested of them in the motion. I think it's important that we do that. We should make it clear that, as a committee, we expect the two hours, and that we're disappointed in that.

That's the minimum that I think we should do.

**The Chair:** That's perfect.

I will discuss that with the clerk and the analysts, but there is no way.... We can send a letter or something, but is it your final position to send a letter and invite them on Tuesday, or to cancel them on Tuesday?

**Mr. Blake Richards:** Well, it's Monsieur Desilets's motion, and I guess we'll see what his comments are.

My feeling is that if we accept them for the hour, we write a letter to express our disappointment that it isn't two hours. I think it's important that we make it clear that we expected two hours. If that's what we're going to do, we should make that clear.

I am, of course, comfortable with using the other hour wisely, if that's what we're going to do.

**The Chair:** That's perfect. That is clear enough.

I have Ms. Blaney, Mrs. Wagantall and Mr. May.

Ms. Blaney.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** Thank you.

My question is around who the witnesses would be for the women veterans study, because what I don't want is to have veterans here and feeling really rushed.

As you know, we've been doing two hours. There is space, if we need to take a break, so they have a more positive experience—even though it's very hard.

I'm curious whether we could know that, because I think that's really relevant. I'll wait to hear that, and then I may have other commentary.

**The Chair:** The clerk can answer that.

I think we have three witnesses.

**The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Alexandre (Sacha) Vasiliev):** The first hour would be with three witnesses. One is a researcher, one is an historian and the other is chief executive officer and co-founder of the Veteran Emergency Transition Services.

• (1725)

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** Are they all women?

**The Clerk:** They are all women, yes.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** They're not veterans. None of them are veterans.

**The Clerk:** None of them have indicated that they are veterans.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Go ahead, Mrs. Wagantall.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** Thank you, Chair.

We had asked for two hours. I understand how busy it is for one to come, let alone two. In speaking with my colleague to my left here, I would suggest that we bring forward another motion to have them return at another time for another hour.

**The Chair:** You would have them come for another hour.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** For another hour; in other words, have them come twice to fill that commitment for the two hours.

**The Chair:** That is noted. Thank you.

Mr. May, go ahead, and then Mr. Casey.

**Mr. Bryan May:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Blaney asked my first question, but after hearing Ms. Wagantall's intervention, I'm very concerned that we are getting into a bit of mission creep with this motion. As we all know, we can invite the ministers. We were inviting two ministers here. To coordinate one schedule is challenging enough; to coordinate two, which they have, to be able to come together as per the motion...is I think what we need to accept. Obviously, it's the will of the committee to decide what they want to do, moving forward. I know that Monsieur Desilets has another addition to this. I will let him speak to his motion.

Pre-empting that a bit, I'm wondering if we could potentially ask the witnesses that he's asking for to be added to this conversation—if it's not so disruptive to the witnesses who have already been invited—and potentially combine those two to fill the time on Tuesday. I know how important it is that we continue with this study. I'm concerned that we'll be adding additional meetings on this issue and that it will delay our ability to get this study done.

**The Chair:** Okay, but I have to tell you that two of the three witnesses for Tuesday are already booked.

**The Clerk:** Three of them are.

**The Chair:** All three are booked.

**Mr. Bryan May:** It was just a suggestion. I understand.

**The Chair:** That's good. That's perfect.

Go ahead, Mr. Casey.

**Mr. Sean Casey (Charlottetown, Lib.):** The only comment I want to make, Mr. Chair, is with respect to Ms. Wagantall's motion. With respect, I think it may be premature. If, after hearing from the two ministers for an hour, we feel that another hour is necessary, it might be appropriate to move and consider the motion then. Maybe we'll feel that the ground is well enough covered, and if it isn't, then I would think....

We'll be better informed to make that call after we hear from them for an hour. That's my point.

[*Translation*]

**The Chair:** I would like to hear what the mover of the motion, Mr. Desilets, has to say on the subject.

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** I don't want there to be any confusion.

There are two motions on the table. The first of the two, which was agreed to by the committee, is to have the two ministers appear, for a total of two hours. I really like Mr. Casey's reaction that we might get what we need after an hour.

My motion deals with witnesses. If I'm not mistaken, we should be debating it, voting on it, adopting it, and so on. The fact that these people will appear after our meeting with the witnesses, if necessary, is extraordinary.

**The Chair:** Mr. Desilets, at the beginning of the meeting, you talked about a notice of motion that you wanted to present.

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** No. There's some confusion about that, which is why I wanted to make the distinction between the two motions. I have already put forward a motion.

**The Chair:** It's already done. Right. It's not another motion.

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** No. We're in the same areas. I think the motion that Ms. Wagantall wanted to propose could be proposed at a later date, following those meetings.

**The Chair:** In short, if I understand correctly, we'll be able to issue the notice of meeting, since the ministers and the three witnesses have been invited. We'll hold that meeting next Tuesday.

As for Thursday, the clerk is doing everything he can to make sure we have the session on trauma. We're here listening to all the witnesses, and I can tell you that even for us as members of Parliament, it's extremely difficult. It would be a good idea to hold this session as soon as possible, given that there are still eight or nine other meetings on the experiences of women veterans.

Is it the will of the committee then to adjourn?

• (1730)

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** I just put my motion on notice. We either have to debate it or vote on it.

**The Chair:** Okay.

Mr. May has the floor.

[*English*]

**Mr. Bryan May:** Thank you.

Not to cut off Mr. Desilets, but I am confused as well, because I thought we were potentially going to a vote here. However, I'm wondering if I could speak to this a bit. Again, I'm a little concerned about mission creep on this issue, and I recognize and respect that the member has the right to move this motion. I wonder if he's open to a friendly amendment to reduce this to one hour. We might be able to support that.

The reason, frankly, is that we're talking about two witnesses for two hours, which, with respect, I think is a lot. Again, I will come back to the study that we have in front of us. It is critical, and it's essential. I think that that's a lot of time to dedicate to two witnesses on this issue. I'll be honest: I think we'll struggle with trying to fill that time with questions.

**The Chair:** Mr. Desilets.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** Mr. Speaker, correct me if I'm wrong.

I submitted two people that I'd like to see, but if the study goes ahead, anyone can call other witnesses. Am I mistaken?

**The Chair:** You're absolutely right.

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** I already have a third witness in mind.

I think you have the right reason to vote against my motion. That's wonderful. Having said that, I'm keeping two-hour meetings with the witnesses.

[*English*]

**Mr. Bryan May:** For clarification, who is the third witness?

[*Translation*]

**The Chair:** You said you had a third witness.

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** I'm going to submit their name. It would be a member of the jury that helped choose the monument.

[*English*]

**Mr. Bryan May:** Does the motion include that? I think the motion just includes the two companies, so is the motion now changing? I'm sorry. Maybe I'm getting ahead of this, but again, this is getting bigger and bigger. I want to have some clarification on what we're actually talking about here.

The motion I have in front of me mentions two witnesses for two hours. Regardless of whether it's two or three, I still think that is excessive. I think we can accomplish in an hour what Mr. Desilets wants to accomplish. In that additional hour that we would have on that day, we could....

It's all right. I'm talking to myself here.

**Voices:** Oh, oh!

**The Chair:** Please, I'm going to ask the clerk to—

**Mr. Bryan May:** I'm sorry. I realize that I was talking to myself for a minute there. I think that we could use that additional hour to invite witnesses from the women's study. I'm sure the clerk is able to do that.

I am concerned now that Mr. Desilets is saying that there's a third witness. That's news to this side, so if we could get clarification from him as to what this third witness conversation is about....

**The Chair:** No, I was talking to the clerk about the third witness.

**The Clerk:** The committee agreed to study the national monument on March 9. Mr. Desilets asked for two ministers for two hours, which was adopted. They're available for one hour, which I believe the committee's agreeing to have next Tuesday. Then Mr. Desilets is essentially saying that, if the study continues afterwards, then he would invite, on top of the two witnesses in his motion, other witnesses if other parties wish to continue with the study.

• (1735)

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** Mr. Speaker, that's not exactly what I said.

The beginning is perfect. I simply want a two-hour meeting on the monument with witnesses. I proposed two witnesses to you, but anyone could suggest others. I am suggesting a third to you now. Otherwise, I would have contacted you this week to see if we could call this other witness. That's what I'm saying. I want nothing more. I only want two hours about the monument with witnesses. Right now, we have two witnesses, but I will very likely be calling a third too.

**The Chair:** I understand, Mr. Desilets, but at the same time—

[*English*]

Yes, I'm going to go back to you.

[*Translation*]

The motion says that “the committee invite representatives from Daoust and from Leger to appear at a subsequent meeting for one hour each”.

It says one hour per witness. Perhaps your third witness is from one of those two organizations.

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** I totally understand the way you read it, but the purpose of the motion was to have two hours to receive witnesses. Logic dictates that it should be one hour, then another hour.

**The Chair:** Okay. Anything is possible with unanimous consent.

Go ahead, Mr. May.

[*English*]

**Mr. Bryan May:** I have a friendly amendment to the motion on the floor. I'd like to deal with that and potentially get to a vote here.

I just wanted to reiterate that it's not how the motion reads, sir. It reads as one hour per witness. When I heard about a third witness, I wondered if this was now a third hour that we're talking about.

We're already at three hours for this. We're already at three hours with the ministers. It's one hour for the minister and now two hours with these witnesses. I think one hour for the witnesses would be ideal.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Excuse me, I'd like to understand.

[*Translation*]

You say you're moving an amendment,

[*English*]

**Mr. Bryan May:** I'm suggesting, as a friendly amendment to Monsieur Desilets's motion regarding the two witnesses, that we do this in one hour as opposed to two.

**The Chair:** Yes, but I heard Mr. Desilets saying that it was important for him to have two hours.

**Mr. Bryan May:** He wants two hours, not one.

**Mr. Terry Dowdall:** It's one with the ministers and one with the witnesses.

**Mr. Bryan May:** I apologize, if this is the case. This is not what I've been hearing. He says he wants two hours with these witnesses.

No?

**The Chair:** I'm sorry, no. The motion said:

That, after hearing from the Minister of Veterans Affairs, Ginette Petitpas Taylor, and Minister of Canadian Heritage, Pascal St-Onge, regarding the controversy surrounding the competition and awarding of the contract for the design of the National Monument to Canada's Mission in Afghanistan, the committee invite representatives from Daoust and from Leger to appear at a subsequent meeting for one hour each.

That's the motion.

**Mr. Bryan May:** That's one hour each. We're talking about two more hours. I'm suggesting that we can do this in one. I have faith.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** I think it's in the translation that we're having trouble here. It's one hour for the ministers and one hour for other witnesses. Is that the intent?

[*Translation*]

**The Chair:** No, because in French, it says "après avoir entendu."

We're listening, Mr. Casey.

[*English*]

**Mr. Sean Casey:** I'm just hoping to give some clarity to it. I'm going to formally move an amendment to delete the word "each" and substitute for it the word "together".

[*Translation*]

**The Chair:** Okay.

[*English*]

Okay, I'm going to go back to you.

I'd like to say thank you to people from the sexual misconduct support and resource centre from DND who are here with us and the women veteran witnesses who appeared in committee. Thank you so much for coming.

You have an amendment. Could you repeat it again, please?

**Mr. Sean Casey:** It's to change the last word in the motion. Delete the word "each" and replace it with the word "together".

**The Chair:** We have an amendment.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** I see no problem with that, Mr. Chair.

**The Chair:** Okay.

There are no objections, so the amendment is carried.

(Amendment agreed to)

• (1740)

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

The analyst would like the floor for 30 seconds.

**Mr. Jean-Rodrigue Paré (Committee Researcher):** There won't be any briefing notes as such for next Tuesday's meeting, but I have had a media review prepared.

The media review includes articles in English and others in French. Because we won't have time to have the French articles translated into English and vice versa, I suggest that we simply send them to you one by one so that the clerk won't be required to request unanimous consent not to have the documents translated.

Therefore, I want to notify you that you will be receiving individual articles from the media review for next week's meeting.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Mr. Desilets, you have the floor.

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** I don't mean to be a pest, but I want to make something clear: we allowed the amendment, but we haven't voted or shared our position on the amended motion.

**The Chair:** All right.

You were right to mention it, Mr. Desilets.

I'd like to thank the interpreters, the technical team, the clerk and the analyst.

The meeting is adjourned.







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