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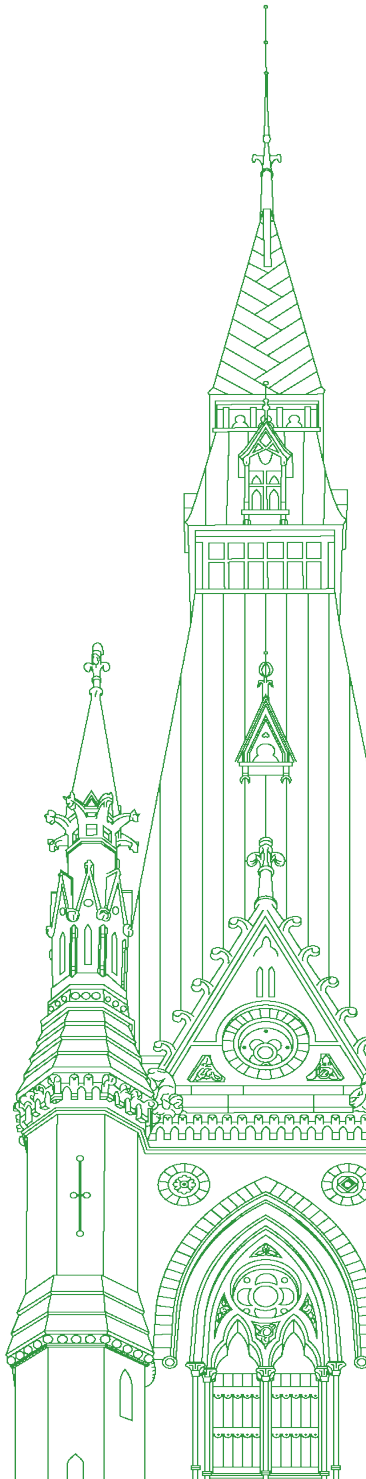

Chair: Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg

Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

Monday, September 23, 2024

● (1535)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg (Bourassa, Lib.)): Welcome to meeting number 104 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs.

[*Translation*]

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motions adopted by the committee on March 9, 2023, and December 5, 2023, the committee is resuming its study on the recognition of Persian Gulf veterans and wartime service.

[*English*]

I would like to welcome Ms. Jean Yip to our committee. She's replacing Mr. Miao.

[*Translation*]

Before we begin, I would ask everyone participating in the meeting, whether in person or by video conference, to avoid bringing their earpieces close to their microphones when speaking, because this creates feedback that can cause hearing injury, especially to interpreters. So I ask everyone to be careful.

Today's meeting is being held in hybrid format, in accordance with the Standing Orders.

I remind you that all comments from participants must be addressed to the chair.

[*English*]

Now I would like to welcome our witness today.

We have, as an individual, Ms. Nina Charlene Usherwood. She's going to be with us by video conference.

Before I give you the floor for five minutes for your opening statement, I have to go to Mr. Blake Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards (Banff—Airdrie, CPC): Mr. Chair, I'm just looking for some clarity on what our meetings are going to look like.

We agreed to four meetings on this study, and we obviously have a report we've been working on. However, I noticed that, with both this meeting and the previous one, we've done one hour with a witness and one hour of committee business. I'm wondering if these are being considered full meetings.

I guess I'm trying to get some sense as to what's left in the study we're working on. Is this meeting and the previous one being considered as meetings so that we, therefore, only have two left? How is this being structured?

I'm looking for some clarity on that.

The Chair: I understand.

In consultation with the committee, I can tell you that we have the report. We said it's about two meetings for the report. Maybe we're going to finish it this afternoon. For that study, we said four meetings. It was an hour and an hour, so it's considered as one meeting for now. Each meeting is two hours.

You can understand that we have six more hours to do in that stretch.

Mr. Blake Richards: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: You're very welcome.

Ms. Nina Charlene Usherwood, the floor is yours. You have five minutes for your opening statement. After that, we're going to ask you some questions to clarify or go through your presentation.

Please, go ahead.

Sergeant Nina Charlene Usherwood (As an Individual): Good day, Mr. Chairman.

I want to thank the committee for inviting me and listening to my experience as a Gulf War veteran. I was deployed to Doha, Qatar, with the Desert Cats from November 30, 1990, until March 3, 1991.

When the government decided to join President Bush's coalition of the willing, the CAF had until recently been focused on the Cold War and the predicted Soviet invasion of western Europe. Our training, our exercises, our equipment and even our uniforms were geared for operations in Germany. While the navy sailed the world, the air force's jets were only deployed to Europe.

From the moment I was notified of my pending deployment to the Middle East, it was clear that the CAF was improvising. The CAF never considered that it would be required to deploy the air force anywhere except Europe, and certainly not to operate in the Middle East without desert uniforms or the necessary equipment or facilities.

Before the first Canadian was deployed to the Middle East until the last Canadian came home, the CAF improvised its participation in Desert Storm. This improvisation was reflected in the treatment of the Gulf War veterans before, during and after the war. I experienced this improvisation from when I was selected to deploy until I returned to Germany following the war.

Here are some examples of improvisation.

Jungle boots were the only tropical boots available for the Canadians, so we wore jungle boots in the desert. We had no wide-brimmed hats, so we purchased Tilley hats for use in the desert sun.

As an experienced technician, I was asked to develop the CF-18 maintenance program for months of deployment without the facilities we would have had available in Canada and Europe. The CF-18, like the navy's ships and helicopters, was rapidly modified for Desert Storm. While in Doha, I had to improvise repair solutions for malfunctioning CF-18s because of the lack of supporting equipment and facilities.

I can give other examples if you wish.

On my return from the Middle East in March 1991, a bus came to the airport to drive me back to Baden, Germany. Arriving in Baden, no one greeted me, except for a medic to secure my three atropine injectors. At 2 a.m., I was left outside a dark building with only my barrack box and duffel bag. I insisted that the medic reopen the building so that I could call one of the few friends who had a phone. Most Canadians at the time had no phones, as German landlines were very expensive.

This improvisation was also evident when the Gulf and Kuwait Medal was given to other veterans. Because my unit was aware that I had served in the gulf and was entitled to the medal, I was told twice to report to receive the medal from an officer. Each time, I was told I was not on the list of recipients. When I challenged my orderly room to explain why I had not received the medal, I was told I was not entitled to it. Eventually, I would receive my medal in a plain, brown envelope.

Gulf War veterans and I received the Kuwait Liberation Medal issued by Saudi Arabia in a ceremony in front of spectators and our peers. I received the Kuwait Liberation Medal issued by Kuwait from the Kuwaiti ambassador in front of spectators and peers.

Neither the CAF nor Canada ever thanked me for my service during Desert Storm. My service record for Desert Storm only reads “009803 MANNING LIST CATGME”. It does not mention the Middle East or a conflict.

Thank you for listening to my Gulf War experience. I'd be happy to answer any questions.

● (1540)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Let's start the first round of questions. I invite Mr. Richards to begin his six minutes.

Mr. Blake Richards: Thank you.

First of all, thank you for being here today. Secondly, and most importantly, thank you for your service to our country.

You had a brief opportunity of five minutes for an opening statement. You mentioned the experience you had with regard to being delayed, at the very least, in receiving your due recognition in terms of a medal for your service in that particular conflict. I think this is something that we hear frequently, in various ways, from a number of veterans. I know that the Afghan veterans, for example, right now feel like the recognition of their service is being delayed, because they're still waiting for a monument to be built, which they've expected for a decade now, essentially.

I wanted to start with that. I have a couple of questions for you, but I want to start with that because I know you've been involved with the organization that's in place to assist with the monument for LGBTQ+ veterans. I believe so, anyway. I believe you're involved with that in some way, are you not?

● (1545)

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: I am just a member. I pay dues and keep track. When it is completed, I hope to go and be there for the opening.

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay. You're a member, but you're not really involved too much with it.

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: No.

Mr. Blake Richards: The reason I wanted to ask you is that they've been far more successful in advancing their monument than the Afghan monument has been. I was hoping to get some insight from you as to how the Afghan veterans can better push for what they want to see, but maybe that's not a fair question to ask you then.

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: The only thing I can point out is that the monument is actually directed to all federal employees of the LGBTQ community, as opposed to just the military.

Mr. Blake Richards: Fair enough. That's fine.

Let me move to the other question. I have a number of them, but the other one that I really hoped to touch on was this one. You obviously have an extensive military background. I know that you can briefly explain, to the committee and to any of those watching, the difference between strategic and tactical planning. If you wouldn't mind, just give us a brief explanation.

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: As a technician, it's only from my reading. I was never educated by the military on the difference. My final rank was sergeant. Most of my career it was corporal, and I wasn't really concerned about “tactical” or “strategic”. Probably most of what I did was more tactical than strategic planning.

Mr. Blake Richards: No problem, and maybe what I can do, not having a military background myself, is just to give my best attempt at explaining the difference. Essentially, tactical planning would be more like immediately dealing with an event on the ground—maybe something like, “Let's take out that machine gun position.” Strategic planning would obviously be dealing more with the long term, the bigger picture of the strategy, things like the D-Day landings in World War II, for example.

I want to get your sense of whether you believe that a war can be waged without strategic planning in place.

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: Just to clarify, because actually I did.... I'm an amateur student of history. There are three levels that the Canadian Armed Forces recognizes. There's tactical, like taking out a machine gun or something like that. There's operational. The D-Day invasion itself was actually an operational mission. The strategic level would be the whole war.

Mr. Blake Richards: That's perfect. I appreciate that clarity.

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: Could I have your question again? I forgot.

Mr. Blake Richards: On the American-led coalition that included us as Canadians and that liberated Kuwait and destroyed the fighting capacity of Saddam Hussein's Iraqi army, I guess what I'm trying to get a sense of is, does the scale of that operation not reflect the implementation of strategic planning and, therefore, does it not—should it not—qualify as a war?

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: Absolutely, it was a war. There was lots of strategic planning. Just like the Canadian operation in the example you gave, the invasion of D-Day, most of the high-level planning was actually done by Americans and British, not Canadians. There were Canadians involved in various different...but we were, because of the amount of commitment we were giving and the number of forces and equipment and stuff like that.... Generally, the people who get really into the strategic are the people providing the most.

Mr. Blake Richards: I think I got a sense from you that you would agree with what I'm saying—that everyone calls the Persian Gulf War a “war”, yet somehow it doesn't seem to be recognized.

Do you agree it should be recognized as a war?

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: Yes, it's a war. There were over a million military personnel involved in it. That's a war.

● (1550)

Mr. Blake Richards: Why do you think it hasn't been recognized as such by the Canadian government?

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: Frankly, I believe the Canadian government doesn't like to think of us as war fighters. It wants to think of us as peacekeepers. It has minimized our involvement in various things, such as the Medak Pocket in Yugoslavia. The government wasn't even talking about that when some of the Canadians were killed. It falsely claimed how they were killed, despite the fact it knew within hours how they were killed—things like this.

The Canadian government on both sides of the aisle, as far as I'm concerned, doesn't like to talk about us as warriors.

Mr. Blake Richards: That's unfortunate.

Thank you for that.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Richards.

Now let's go for six minutes to Mr. Randeep Sarai.

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

Sergeant Usherwood, I want to welcome you back to the committee. I know members of this committee very much appreciate the testimony you've provided over the years on a wide range of topics. It's worth mentioning, in particular, our most recent study, which produced the report “Invisible No More”.

On the topic of our most recent report—before I get to my questions—I'd like to ask whether you've had a chance to review the “Invisible No More” report and could share with our committee any initial observations.

What are your thoughts on the recommendations, and what do you hope to see come out of that work?

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: I read the executive summary, but I have not had time yet to read the whole report front to back. I intend to, but I've been extremely busy this summer since it came out. I don't have any comments on it.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: That's fair enough.

During last week's meeting, we heard some powerful testimony from Kevin “Sammy” Sampson, vice-president of the Rwanda Veterans Association of Canada, regarding this report. He talked about how there is always a degree of unpredictability while serving and how circumstances can change the goal of a mission overnight because of what is being faced in real time.

Would you agree with that assessment, and would you be comfortable sharing your own perspective on that?

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: I agree it is a matter of improvisation. Frankly, that's what the Canadian military is famous for, all the way back to World War I. We were more capable of improvising, for example, than the British army units. I think improvisation is important, but part of being prepared to improvise is anticipating the potential deployment. I feel that the CAF, like I said, never anticipated that we were going to fight anything but the Soviets in Germany. I think that's reflected in the policy.

I will say that, during my career—it ended in 2022—I could see more clearly that the military took lessons from the Gulf War on not being prepared. Some of these were, for example, implemented during Operation Impact. I have forgotten what the one was in Libya.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: When it comes to the topic of this study, I'm curious to hear how much awareness you think there is among CAF members, veterans and the general population about the different classifications we're studying today.

Is it a special measure? Is it a war? How many folks do you think are aware of these classifications, especially those in the forces versus veterans, and finally the general public?

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: I would say that all people in the military, within a few years, become well aware of the difference between a war veteran and a special duty area veteran, and what the implications of that are.

We are all in the military. I don't know. Maybe if you went far enough back among veterans.... Any veteran, other than maybe World War II or Korea veterans, would be aware of that, because they were all engaged in operations and sometimes fought wars, saw their peers killed beside them and were not treated like a veteran who had been in a war.

For example, in Cyprus in 1974, with the invasion by the Turkish army, the airborne regiment at the time fought to maintain their position on the United Nations lines. Some of them died. I think everybody in the military is very aware of that.

● (1555)

Mr. Randeep Sarai: You're saying that those in the military, after a few years of service, are well aware of it. Obviously, as veterans, they're more aware of it. What about the general population? Are they aware of these classifications?

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: Frankly, the general population is not aware of the military except for what shows up on the national news.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: In your opening statement, you touched a little bit on how you became aware of the definitions, their differences, and what your reaction was. Can you elaborate on how you felt when you found out about the different classifications, based on being in different theatres, and what that means?

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: It's more as I got older in the military. I looked back on the service and what it cost me. I became resentful of the fact that there were special duty areas. I was diagnosed with skin cancer, and VAC has accepted that I had skin cancer. It granted my application. Because I was in a special duty area, it did not agree with the rest, but since it accepted my initial application, I'm fine. I will accept that.

However, for me, I'm very conscious of it, especially in the last 10 years.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Sarai.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Desilets, you have the floor for six minutes.

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

Good afternoon, colleagues.

Ms. Usherwood, thank you for being with us. I believe this is your third visit. Thank you for making yourself available once again. Thank you also for your service.

My first question may seem a bit simple: Having taken part in the Gulf War, do you feel aggrieved, compared to your colleagues who took part in the two great wars and the Korean War?

[*English*]

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: The simple answer is yes.

I'm not eligible for the various benefits they offer. If I pass away, members of my family do not become a war spouse or war dependants. No, it's straightforward. The difference is very clear, and as I said, everybody in the military knows the difference.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Could you explain in a little more detail the difference, in financial terms, between having taken part in a recognized war and having taken part in a war that is not recognized or, in the terms used, in a special service?

[*English*]

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: Because the veterans charter came into being in 2006, I can't directly compare. Unless the veterans charter was changed with its maximum monthly limitation, we could never approach the amount of money for the same injury that some veterans would have received if they were in Korea or, for that matter, even if they were injured in the example I gave you, which was Cyprus.

They can have a higher lifetime benefit. I'm at my highest maximum lifetime benefit. I know of other veterans who are getting more than $4,000 a month, and I'm sitting at $1,700 now. I am being told that I'm at the max, despite being determined to be 100% disabled—well, now 108% disabled.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Do you have the impression that, in the course of your missions, and in particular that of the Gulf War, you had to face the same kind of dangers as people who took part in the major, recognized wars?

[*English*]

Mr. Bryan May (Cambridge, Lib.): I have a point of order, Mr. Chair. I'm so sorry to interrupt.

There's some feedback on the online piece, and I noticed the interpreters are hearing it a little bit stronger than we are, so I'm wondering if we can check that.

● (1600)

The Chair: Exactly, but I don't know if there's something that the technicians can do. We knew from the beginning that it was not so good. Is it okay? Yes, they're working on it. Maybe we should continue, but I'm going to keep looking at the interpreters to see if we need to stop.

I'm sorry, Ms. Usherwood. I don't know if you would like MP Desilets to repeat the question, but please go ahead.

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: Could the question be repeated, please?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: I'll do it with pleasure.

I was just asking you if you felt you faced the same risks, dangers and potential injuries during your participation in the Gulf War as your colleagues who took part in the other wars, which are recognized.

[*English*]

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: On the night of February 25 and into February 26, Saddam fired all his remaining Scud missiles. At the time the alert went off, and I had heard this many times. I was up to my bare hands—because we didn't have proper protective equipment at the time—in aircraft fuel, fixing a CF-18. For a moment, I was thinking, “Should I react? Should I just continue this job, which will allow me to put the panel back on and stop the fuel from leaking on the ground, or should I run for cover?”

In the end, I decided to run for cover. There was a nearby aircraft shelter that was hardened, so I did. Meanwhile, the fuel all leaked out. However, the Scud missile actually missed the location I was at. Some of us—not me but some of the others—went to look at the crater that it blasted. As best as I can remember, it was 20 feet across and about 15 feet deep. Even if I had been in the shelter and it had been hit, I still would have been gone. That same night, there was also another Scud launched at a warehouse that the Americans were using for a barracks. There were 28 people killed and over 100 injured.

Yes, I was exposed to the same danger as anybody else.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: I don't want to put words in your mouth, but isn't there also an ego wound? I understand that there are differences in salary and pension, among other things, but isn't there an ego wound related to the fact that the important work you've done hasn't been recognized at its fair value?

[*English*]

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: I don't think the military recognized a lot of my service, to start with, throughout my career. I don't know if it was an injury to my.... I guess it wasn't to my ego so much, but for the many things that I did for the military, there was the lack of appreciation and the lack of ethical leadership that I experienced. I suffered a moral injury, which, again, VAC has accepted. VAC has given me a diagnosis of trauma.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Desilets.

[*English*]

Let's go to Ms. Blaney for six minutes, please.

Ms. Blaney, you have the floor.

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

Thank you for being here, Nina. I appreciate it very much.

I also want to take another opportunity to thank you for your service and for your generosity with this committee, because you do come visit us and you educate us every single time. Thank you for that.

My first question to you is sort of two questions wrapped up in one. I would really like it if you could share with the committee how being in the Gulf War affected your mental and physical health. The second part that I want to tie in with that is.... You said in your introduction to us that Canada never thanked you for your service during that time.

Can you talk about how it impacted you mentally and physically, and what the ramifications of that are in the context of Canada not appreciating or acknowledging that service?

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: Thank you for your question.

After the war was over and I returned to Germany, I was unaware of any impact on my health at the time. Other than my anger, due to the treatment by the CAF towards the end of combat, I did not think my time in the gulf had any impact on me. I knew what Gulf War syndrome was, and I didn't think I had it. I would have said that for years and years.

However, recently, I've been diagnosed with inappropriate sinus tachycardia. When I'm relaxed, watching TV or something like that, just watching a movie, my heart rate will suddenly elevate. It will go up by 30 beats per minute, and it'll stay there. It just lingers. It has even lingered through a night of sleeping. I don't know what has caused that, and so far they haven't figured it out. I get to go do another test tomorrow. Maybe they can figure it out then.

I am conscious that, during the Gulf War, I took pyridostigmine bromide tablets every eight hours a day for almost a month. The reason we were told we were taking it was that, if we were exposed to sarin gas, we had the atropine injectors, which would help our hearts keep beating, but if we weren't exposed to enough, we were told that the atropine could kill us and that we needed the pyridostigmine bromide, the PB tablets, to help keep us from being killed by the atropine.

Additionally, we took antibiotics every 12 hours for weeks. If you do the math, that means every four hours we were supposed to take a pill.

Another thing that happened was that there was an anthrax vaccine, and it's been around for years, against the bacteria, but they decided that we would get it. The way they decided who would receive the vaccine was that they looked at the anticipated rotation date back to Germany or to Canada. Because the vaccine took three parts, if your anticipated return to Germany or to Canada was going to be before you could get the third part, you weren't going to get it. Therefore, if you were like me—scheduled to get it four days after you were scheduled to be rotated back—then they started you on this. If you were scheduled to go a week before I was scheduled to go back, you wouldn't get it.

Also, we were exposed to the oil fires. When he lit the oil fields on fire, we did not experience bright sunlight again in the gulf—period. The first time I really saw the sun again was when I was flying back to Germany and we lifted up.... I don't know if it was 10,000 or 20,000 feet. We suddenly broke into brilliant sunlight. It was not a cloudy day. There were no clouds in the sky. As I looked out the window of the Hercules aircraft, I could see the black ring of smoke that was entirely around, horizon to horizon. It was absolutely black. I've been in poor weather conditions before, even some dust conditions in the south, but it was nothing like this. It was just pure black, like the black of your glasses frame.

I have skin cancer, and VAC said, “Okay, you were in a special duty area, so we will accept that.” It took them a while to accept that.

I talked about feeling that Scud missile attack towards us. The first night that it started—the war—was January 16 into January 17. We had trained for this kind of potential nuclear, biological, chemical warfare in Europe. Thinking back now, what we did there was a joke, but we did....

I had my NBCW suit with me. We knew the war was starting. Even prior to the war, we were told we had to take it downtown, when we were allowed to go downtown. I don't know how all the locals would have liked it if we had been able to hear an alarm and if we had suddenly gotten dressed in this and none of the others had it.

● (1605)

I thought that was a waste of time, but we had it, and on the first night, the alarm went off five times. Each time, I got into my full gear, sitting with my gas mask. I lay on my bed in the bunk, because I was off shift at the time, and I looked at the thin, tin roof of the old workers' camp in CD1. I thought, “Well, I'm definitely safe against a Scud missile with that thin tin above me.”

As it turned out, none of them came toward us. They were all heading toward Saudi Arabia or Israel, but we had no way of knowing that. It was a very tense night.

● (1610)

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you.

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: On February 23, 2022, I went to bed knowing that Putin was going to launch his missiles and his attack on Ukraine. It was clear from the news. I'm someone who follows the news, so it was very clear to me.

I woke up in the middle of the night. First of all, I was dreaming I was back in Doha, looking at the roof. I woke up in the middle of the night and I was sure I was in Doha, because I knew what the Ukrainians were going through. I know what that feeling of fear is. I know what it is to lie there and know that you really have no protection whatsoever.

If a Scud had hit us directly, it wouldn't have even mattered what shelter there was. We would have been dead. However, the one Scud he fired at us.... He fired 88 Scuds, and the one he fired was not....

I'm sorry.

The Chair: No, that's okay. Thank you. I'm learning a lot listening to you and what you went through. You keep smiling. That's great.

Now I'd like to invite Mrs. Wagantall to take her five minutes.

An hon. member: [*Inaudible—Editor*]

The Chair: I'm sorry. Mr. Dowdall, please, go ahead.

Mr. Terry Dowdall (Simcoe—Grey, CPC): Thank you very much.

I believe you're up in the next round, Cathay.

First of all, I want to thank you, Ms. Usherwood, for being here today, and for your service as well.

This is our second hour, but our first day of the study as a whole. It's been really interesting to hear, like you said earlier, about.... We're studying more time and special service, and the difference. We had a special guest last week, Kevin Sampson, who was here as well, and I found it quite interesting to hear what he had to say in his testimony. I think you were bang on when you said the fact is that the only people who truly understand it are those who are part of the CAF. The rest of society is really not up to speed on this.

What I've really heard over the two meetings thus far is that the main reason they weren't recognized—why it was believed they weren't—is the fact that it would be a huge financial issue for the government. That's probably the number one response for “why”. Now, listening to you and your testimony, you were saying it had something to do with the government's perception of the difference between peacekeeping and war fighters. You, during your tour, were a war fighter.

I don't know if you could speak a little more to that part of it and the financial aspect.

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: I call it the myth of peacekeeping. In Canada, we say that Lester Pearson invented peacekeeping. Well, I don't know how that would go with Brigadier-General Angle, who died in 1948, 1949 or 1950—I've forgotten. He died five or six years before the Suez crisis on a UN peacekeeping mission, a mission that still exists to this day.

As I said, Canada has this myth about what really goes on with peacekeeping. That's what I see. When we have Canadians who die in peacekeeping missions, we generally don't acknowledge them, because that would suggest that it's not just, “Oh, we go there with our blue berets and our white vehicles and we stand and hold our hands up.” No—Canadians die.

Last I remember, 118 have died on peacekeeping missions. To do that, to stand in front of somebody.... There is the Gandhi example. It stands there and just accepts what someone else is doing, but that's not going to get sides like, for example, what's going on in Ukraine or, for that matter, what's going on in the Gaza or Lebanon.... They're not going to stop. By the way, there are peacekeepers right now in the area between Israel and Lebanon and the Golan Heights and all that. They're still there. That's another peacekeeping mission that predates the Suez Canal by eight years—in 1948, I think it was—and in 1948 the first person died there. It was a French army soldier.

No, the Canadian government doesn't like to think of Canadian military personnel dying. I think that Canadians are actually better than that. They don't blame us for being where the government sends us. They understand that. The policy decisions that the government makes as to where they deploy us, they can be blamed for that, but not for the personal deaths of Canadians. All of us who have ever died volunteered. There hasn't been anybody in combat—Canadian—who wasn't a volunteer, except I'm not sure about World War I. The conscripts never went to Europe in World War II.

● (1615)

Mr. Terry Dowdall: Thank you very much.

Another thing I heard that made me a bit upset, I guess, was the part where you didn't receive your medal originally, but then you did and you were told you weren't entitled to it. It really didn't feel like you had your thanks for service. Is that felt by quite a few people during that period of time, that they were...or that they just didn't get the thanks they deserved? That's number one.

Number two, as you know, we're having a tough time recruiting. Do you think that some of the ways we dealt with our past are maybe perhaps catching up to the present?

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: There were definitely other people who felt that. Some of the medals, the first issue, weren't made very well. Frankly, they peeled. My medal still looks cheap compared to any medal that's been stamped since.

As far as the recruiting goes, I guess it's possible, but I can't say for sure that's why. Of course, I mean, I don't want to go to Russia or, for that matter, the States, where it's hyper-patriotic. I don't want someone with a rifle beside me who doesn't really want to be there and believe in what we're doing. I never wanted that. We don't want that. I think the time is coming.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dowdall.

Now I'd like to go to Ms. Hepfner for five minutes, please.

Ms. Lisa Hepfner (Hamilton Mountain, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

I really want to thank you as well, Sergeant Usherwood, for being here with us today and sharing your experiences. Also, thank you for your service. I'm sorry that you haven't heard that enough.

I think my colleague Rachel Blaney took the questions that I had originally prepared for you. In your opening statement, you talked about all these indignities that I think you've suffered. You talked about the medal. You just brought it up again now. You talked about having to scratch and scramble for proper gear when you were in the desert and having to quickly modify CF-18s on the fly.

What would you say is the overall impact of these indignities? Is it something that you think is fairly common among your peers or do you think you were singled out?

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: I think it's very common among my peers. The resentment is because.... We see it as a war. It was a war. On the base I was at in Doha, there was an American squadron as well. Three of its aircraft were shot down and all of the pilots were beat up by Iraqis. We were conscious that we were in a war zone from day one. Now, it's 35-whatever years ago. Most of the people who served at that time are gone. I was one of the last to still be there, I suspect.

Yes, the people at the time were definitely conscious of that. In the same way, the people I know who served in Afghanistan are resentful of the way they have been treated.

● (1620)

Ms. Lisa Hepfner: I was moved when you said that you became resentful after the fact, when it sort of weighed on you.

We're here as a legislative committee to to find solutions, so when you walk away from today, what would you most like to see? What benefits do you think you should be receiving now that you don't receive?

What legislative changes do you think we need to make?

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: I think the government needs to be able to recognize that its use of special duty areas is penalizing the veterans who serve in those areas because, literally, there are allowances that you can't get.

Ms. Lisa Hepfner: What kinds of allowances? Give me an example.

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: There's a clothing allowance, for example. I don't know what it really is because I knew I wasn't entitled to it, so I never looked for it.

If I had passed away in my service.... Actually, that was before the veterans charter, so that changed everything. Currently, if someone passes away, the person gets half their military pension, but they're not a war widow or a war spouse if their partner dies. That's actually a difference in the funding that you receive.

The maximum funding you can get for pain and disability—or whatever you want to call it because they've changed the names a few times—is literally lower because of it not being considered a war.

Ms. Lisa Hepfner: How would you attack this legislatively?

Would you change that definition? Would you offer more benefits to more veterans?

Tell me more.

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: Repeal the veterans charter of 2006. It's that simple.

Ms. Lisa Hepfner: Please elaborate on that.

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: The veterans charter, which was voted and passed unanimously by the House of Commons, was not studied. I and my fellow service members and veterans feel it was a way for the government to save money by putting an absolute cap on the amount of money that you could get. Initially, it was just an absolute cap, but now they have said that it was not even remotely fair so we can get a lifetime pension. However, we can't get the same amount of pension. That started with the new veterans charter in 2006.

For my skin cancer that could well kill me, I have 5% disability. For my bad feet from wearing my boots, I have 5% disability.

My skin cancer was worth about 80 bucks a month at the time when they awarded it. My bad feet were worth $360 a month, because I applied for the problems with my feet before the veterans charter came in and I applied for the skin cancer after. It's that simple.

Ms. Lisa Hepfner: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Hepfner.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Desilets, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

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

Ms. Usherwood, I'd like to know how you feel when you see military personnel from the three wars being recognized without having been deployed, compared to you and what you experienced during the Gulf War.

[*English*]

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: All of us who serve in the military are well aware that we don't have to go to another country to be at risk. I strapped an F-18 pilot in at Cold Lake in 1984. He flew out to the Cold Lake range—Cold Lake, Alberta is maybe 60 or 70 miles away—and never came back. That same summer, there was a technician in the back of a T-33 who, along with the pilot, never came back.

All of us know that we don't have to be deployed to die. There are at least 1,800 names in the seventh Book of Remembrance, and a large number of those were killed in Canada. We all know that, while we're there, we're potentially going to be.... I think people should be acknowledged for what they do. If I'd really wanted to, I probably could have gotten out of the gulf. You get a medical exam. I don't think it's that difficult to prevent and not do it.

● (1625)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: After the bill was passed by Parliament, the charter came into force in 2006. Now, what you basically want is for all people who have served on missions, no matter what they were or where they took place, to be on an equal footing.

Is that correct?

[*English*]

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: Actually, I'd like the charter repealed because it puts maximum caps on. If you applied it to everybody right now, the Korea veterans would lose some of their current benefits.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Desilets.

[*English*]

Now let's go to Ms. Blaney for two and a half minutes.

Please, go ahead.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you, Chair.

I want to come back, Nina, to the medals.

When I heard your presentation, you talked about the Gulf War medal that you ended up receiving in a brown envelope. You also received the Kuwait Liberation Medal. In those processes.... First of all, regarding the Gulf War medal, did you find out what the confusion was at any point? Did they clarify what the back-and-forth was and why they gave it to you in a brown envelope?

Secondly, we heard testimony that, sometimes, you're given medals you can't wear over your heart. You have to put it on the other side. With the Kuwait Liberation Medal, is that the case?

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: To answer your second question first, those medals cannot be worn with the other medals. That's in the policy of the department of heraldry or whatever it is with the Governor General. I don't have that issue. Except, frankly, the Saudi Arabian medal is far better looking than the Canadian medal. The Canadian medal, like I said, looks cheap. When I first saw it start to peel, others said, “Wow, that's some medal.” The CDs are nicely stamped out, but this wasn't. I don't know whether anybody has gotten around to replacing those. They were doing cheap stamped medals at the time.

Your first part was about why I got it in the brown envelope and stuff like that.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Yes. Did they ever clarify the confusion?

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: It was somebody in the orderly room who decided there was nothing saying that I was there, so I shouldn't get it. I don't think they consulted with anybody. They just made their own decision. Why I got it in the end was because I pushed. If I hadn't pushed, I wouldn't have gotten it.

In the forces, we have “thousand-milers”—plain envelopes sealed with a string so you can reuse them over and over. If I'm sending something to you, I address it to you. When you get it and want to use it to send something to someone else, you strike that out with your pen and write a new address on it. We call them thousand-milers because they can travel for a long time. I don't know if they use them anymore, but that's what it came in.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We have two more MP interventions.

I invite Mrs. Cathay Wagantall, for five minutes.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall (Yorkton—Melville, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Sergeant Usherwood, for your service, but also for how well you have explained things for us today. It's very much appreciated.

I just have one thing to ask, because I have limited time. The Gulf War association put forward a petition to the House of Commons in March 2023, calling upon the Government of Canada to reclassify the Persian Gulf War, the liberation of Kuwait, from a special duty area to wartime service within all Canadian policies. The main argument was that, of course, if they designated that as a wartime service and extended it to Persian Gulf veterans, they would need to extend it to all post-Korea veterans who were deployed.

With petitions, ministers are always required to respond. This is the response tabled by the Minister of National Defence. I'd like you to pretend I'm the Minister of National Defence. I'm going to read the response, and I would like to get your reaction to that, to me, as though I was the minister. I would like to know, how do you feel about that?

The response tabled by the Minister of National Defencestated:

> Applying these categories is not meant to signal greater or lesser respect for the service of members and Veterans, nor are such categories indicative of a lesser degree of risk on the part of those deployed.

There you have it. There's nothing to see here.

● (1630)

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: That's exactly my interpretation. I think it's been done like that all along. However, it does have an impact when you go to Veterans Affairs, straight up.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: You said when they become veterans, they become more aware. Is that what you were referring to?

What happens, specifically, when you become a veteran, so that you're more aware and this seems so demeaning.

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: Most people, when they're leaving the forces, look back and reflect on it. Especially for me, I was approaching 60. I looked back and reflected on various things I'd done during my career.

Senior service military personnel are conscious of what the difference means, and how it impacts them. As I said, everybody in the military, after a few years, knows the difference. You're not a war veteran as far as the military is concerned, and also as far as VAC is concerned.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: There isn't the same level of respect, and definitely you faced the same risks from what we heard today in regard to your service. Thank you.

I'm finished, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Next, we have MP Brian May for five minutes.

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

Sergeant, thank you for your service to your country, and a special thanks for being here yet again to help this committee navigate some of these challenging conversations.

I want to touch base on something you were just talking about with Monsieur Desilets. It got me thinking about my time as Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of National Defence. I really appreciated your comment that you don't need to be deployed to serve your country and to die for your country. I was sitting here reflecting on the two soldiers we lost at Petawawa recently, in the crash there. I had the opportunity to visit the crash site. The base commander took me through the scenario and some of the stories that were told of how that rescue operation unfolded. It was truly amazing to hear some of the specific accounts of that horrible accident. I think we have to keep in mind that we're talking about service when we're talking about voluntary service, and the importance of recognizing all who serve.

In our ridings, we all have different organizations that recognize veterans or help keep communities connected to military service. Obviously, Legions come to mind. One thing was really upsetting to me. I have a number of Legions in my riding. At one of them, I had an eye-opening experience early on, as a new member of Parliament. When I asked if any veterans from Afghanistan or the Persian Gulf War were members of our local Legion, one of the members of the Legion said, well, they're not veterans. That has always stuck with me. Thankfully that particular individual is no longer involved in that Legion. I'm very proud of my Legions and the leadership we have, but that was a really interesting take from somebody who you'd think was there to advocate for and to thank those who served, all those who served, with the Canadian Armed Forces.

I'm wondering what your opinion is on the classification differences. Have you experienced that? Have you heard from people who have experienced that different level of service because they served in one conflict versus another?

● (1635)

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: I can't say that I personally experienced it. I don't relate to the Legion. I didn't relate to it before, because, frankly, when I first joined, I was younger. When I came back from the gulf, there were still a lot of people left from Korea and even World War II. They wouldn't have seen me as a veteran because the government doesn't call me a veteran.

Maybe 10 years ago I sat and listened to a representative from Veterans Affairs, I think, talk about the new veterans as opposed to the previous veterans. It was government for sure. I think it was Veterans Affairs. They talked about the new veterans and how they weren't the same as the old veterans. One of the people sitting beside me listening to this was in the former Yugoslavia and experienced combat. They were pretty darn upset to hear a government official say that.

We are not considered veterans by the government. We didn't fight in a war.

Mr. Bryan May: We've heard you and others say that this is about money, but I think what you're suggesting is that it goes beyond that. It goes to a real and potentially cultural issue. We've talked a little bit about peacekeeping versus wartime service. Do you believe it's more than just the money?

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: I think it's both, but the government hasn't wanted to support its veterans since World War I. It has tried to avoid supporting the veterans to the level it should because of money.

Mr. Bryan May: I'm getting an indication from the chair that I have a very brief opportunity to ask a question.

I just really want to turn it to you. In closing, do you have any final thoughts that we should hear for this study?

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: I should have anticipated that. No, I don't. I can't think of any right now.

Mr. Bryan May: In that case, thank you so much for once again appearing before us and helping us with this study.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. May.

It's my turn to thank Ms. Nina Charlene Usherwood. On behalf of the committee and myself, I'd really like to thank you. We appreciate your input.

[*Translation*]

Colleagues, we will suspend the meeting for a moment before continuing it in camera to work on our study on the transition to civilian life.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]