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Chair

Mr. Rick Casson

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• (1535)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Rick Casson (Lethbridge, CPC)): We have quorum and we have our witnesses, so we'll call to order the 14th meeting of the Standing Committee on National Defence. We'll continue our study on the Canadian Forces in Afghanistan.

We have a couple of agenda items today, ladies and gentlemen. We have witnesses to hear and then we have committee business. We have a notice of motion from Mr. Bachand, and then we have planning for future business to deal with. We also have bells at 5:30, for a vote at a quarter to. If we could deal with our witnesses and terminate that at a quarter after, we should be able to deal with our committee business before 5:30, when the bells will ring.

I'd like to welcome to the committee today Major-General Daniel Benjamin, commander of Canadian Operational Support Command, and Colonel Jocelyn Cousineau.

Gentlemen, welcome. You've given us the presentation that I understand you're going to be using. We'll turn the meeting over to you for that presentation, and then we'll go into questions. But you're probably familiar with how the committee works.

Major-General Benjamin.

[Translation]

MGen Daniel Benjamin (Commander, Canadian Operational Support Command, Department of National Defence): Thank you very much and good afternoon to one and all, and particularly members of the Committee.

I am Commander of the Canadian Operational Support Command. With me today is Colonel Cousineau, who is my Chief of Plans.

[English]

Canadian Operational Support Command is a new command. It started in January, so we are only eight months old. We're kind of new, then, and not yet fully mature, but we are obviously going through this process.

I'd like to offer you a briefing deck, which I've provided in both English and French, so that you can go through the different slides with me. I have some pictures in there that really depict what my command is all about. Because it is such a new command, it's quite a change in the way we do business in the Canadian Forces in regard to supporting operations throughout the world.

[Translation]

I would like to take you through the slides. Please turn to the second slide.

[English]

This slide outlines the different aspects I'd like to cover with you—the command and control structure, the mission and the roles, the concept of operations, and what my organization is all about.

In slide three, you get a full view of the Canadian Forces as they are right now. It's a very cumbersome diagram, but I'd like you to focus right in the middle. Where you see purple boxes, all these boxes are new as of January 31 or February 1. They are the operational-level commands that the Chief of the Defence Staff has established.

I'm on the right-hand side, as commander of CANOSCOM. As you can see from this diagram, I do report directly to the Chief of the Defence Staff. However, you should all realize that my real job is to support the other three commands that are on the same line—the Special Operations Forces Command; Expeditionary Force Command, which is very related to Afghanistan; and Canada Command, which is very much on the domestic and continental front.

With this diagram I'd also like to highlight the fact that I'm linked to the associate deputy ministers, who all have functional responsibilities from a governmental perspective. I make sure those functional responsibilities are also well taken care of in operations. We establish a technical net, if you wish, and then I make sure that these aspects—infrastructure, environment, security, and so on—are followed as best we can in operations.

[Translation]

So, there is a connection with Assistant Deputy Ministers. That is a fundamental part of this Command.

[English]

Moving to slide four, you can see our mission. It is to provide effective and efficient operational support to Canadian Forces operations, be they domestic, continental, or expeditionary. What you should take from this is that I give de facto support to operations everywhere in the world, to all of them.

I do have primary roles, and the next slide can show you graphically what those roles are all about. But those roles, as such, bring me into shaping the development of new capabilities in terms of support, generating support entities to go and activate the theatre of operations, and obviously helping in the planning and sustaining of our operations throughout the world.

So I'm in all aspects of force development, force generation, and force employment—all aspects.

[Translation]

I would now like to draw your attention to the next slide, which provides a graph detailing the operations of this Command.

[English]

I think that's the most important slide. We will probably refer to it during the question period.

Let's assume the government is asking us to do an operation overseas or in Canada. We have to establish a theatre of operation, so we have to project a force. I help to project that force through movement control, so we can look at what we have in the Canadian Forces in terms of maritime ships, airplanes, strategic lift, and if that—

Hon. Joe McGuire (Egmont, Lib.): These are blank pages.

The Chair: From the report that was tabled?

Hon. Joe McGuire: Yes.

The Chair: Have we used them all?

Is it just yours that's blank, Joe?

Hon. Joe McGuire: I don't know.

The Chair: Can we get another copy or two of these in English? They have some blank ones there.

Let's just hold on and we'll get this sorted out here.

Does anybody else have blank pages?

• (1540)

Hon. Joe McGuire: I'll just follow along.

The Chair: While we get one for Mr. McGuire, we'll get you to go ahead. He can follow along.

Thank you.

MGen Daniel Benjamin: If we don't have enough military aircraft or ships to project our own force, then I can go through contracts and coordinate the whole movement of the force that has to be projected overseas.

When we go in theatre, the key is to activate that theatre. We call this a “theatre activation”.

Imagine it's a city. Most often that location has been quite devastated, either by war or a disaster. We go in, and we have to make sure that our soldiers have a roof; that they have water and electricity; that they have their stores, through their warehouse; that they have a medical facility; that they have the proper policing, security, and detention facilities; that they have the maintenance bay—the garage, if you wish; that they have the communications network in theatre and back to Canada; and that they have personal services, like a gym, a Tim Hortons, and things to that effect.

When we go in we try to establish this to make sure our soldiers are going to be well taken care of. That's what we call theatre activation, and my people are quite involved with it.

Then the forces come in with a national support element. They go rotation by rotation, and they can stay in that theatre for as long as we wish. I don't get involved after that, except just to monitor.

When they do that, I'm involved in terms of the pipeline, if you wish, between Canada and the theatre. The theatre can be in Canada, but in this case we're looking at Afghanistan. So how do we do the sustainment from Canada? What is that pipeline? What is this lifeline of equipment, materiel, personnel, repatriation of remains, repatriation of casualties, and so on? It's a flow back and forth between Canada and the theatre. It's very much a national issue, and I'm responsible for making sure this pipeline works well for all of those different resources.

If the government decides afterwards to close a theatre, then I send my expert back to that theatre and we do the drawdown and closure of that theatre, and make sure that proper remediation is done.

So *grosso modo*, this is where I'm very much involved with operations. If you look at Afghanistan right now, the theatre is well established, so I'm not involved in sustaining, supporting people in the theatre, but I'm very much involved with the lifeline between Canada and that theatre, supporting Lieutenant-General Gauthier, commander of the Canadian Expeditionary Force Command, in making sure that things go well and we're well connected.

[Translation]

Slide No. 8

[English]

shows you the overall Canadian Forces support construct, which has changed. We used to have units and formations, embedded with the associate deputy minister role, that were providing support. With the new construct, those formations and units have come mostly under my command, so we now have a military commander who makes sure that the service delivery, the way we support our own forces, is under only one umbrella and that it provides all the different support functions that we see in a theatre of operation. This frees up the associate deputy ministers to really focus on strategic guidance, procurement, and all of the strategic issues that they have in their realm of responsibilities.

You see at the bottom of the diagram that we provide support not only to forces like those in Afghanistan—the Expeditionary Forces Command—but also to forces in Canada Command, or to the Special Forces Command, which sometimes has specific missions directly for the Chief of Defence Staff. That gives you the overall construct.

On slide number seven, we see the capability thrust on the top, which we have just discussed. What is key for you are the functions at the bottom. You can see the types of functions that really report to me, and which I take care of at the theatre level, reaching back to Canada. We're looking at the engineers, for vertical and horizontal construction. We're looking at the logistics, the distribution system, the warehousing, and so on. We're looking at maintenance, especially to bring back the damaged vehicles and bring forward the replacements. We're looking at health services, primarily at the high level—we call it row three, for example, in Afghanistan, which is an advanced surgical centre—and things to that effect.

We're looking at communications, and very much at the strategic link between the theatre and Canada, which is based very much on satellite communications. We're looking at contactors. We have a contract called CANCAP, which reinforces our people and the theatre to do that. We're looking at personnel support, like the Tim Hortons we have over there, the gym facilities, and so on. These are the types of functions. At the far end we have the military police, so we're looking at detention. In the case of Afghanistan, we call it a process facility, which we are making sure works well. These are the types of functions for which we set up the theatre, and which we then monitor and sustain from here in Canada.

In the last slide, you see the organization. It's not only the headquarters here in Ottawa; it's also a command that has units and formations. From the left to the right at the bottom, you see that my primary formation is the joint support group, and this group is in Kingston. Under this group we have so-called purple units, those units that have army-navy-air force functions within them. Those units are, for example, the 1 Engineer Support Unit, which is in Moncton. We have the 4 CF MCU movement unit in Montreal; the 3 Canadian Support Group—3 CSG—also in Montreal. These are all logistics units. And we have the Canadian Forces Postal Unit that is in Trenton. All these units are really purple and support operations from here.

The second box is called the Joint Signals Regiment. It also focuses on joint responsibility—so purple responsibility—focusing on the communication network between the theatre and Canada. That unit is in Kingston. The third one is the Canadian Materiel Support Group. This group has all of the ammunition depots and supply depots we have here in Canada. That allows me to have the end-to-end process of the supply chain from here to the theatre, which is a great enabler.

The next box after that is the health services. They have been centralized from a Canadian Forces perspective, and they are under my operational control for supporting operations everywhere in the world. The next box is the communication reserve, which is a reserve entity that reinforces the Joint Signal Regiment from Kingston in establishing the proper communication network. Then we have people who are responsible to me, especially the Canadian Forces provost marshal, who makes sure all of the functions, including the military police, are part of this organization.

This gives you a quick look at this command and at what we are all about. It is a new organization. We are still maturing, as I said. We are trying to be a learning organization, and we're getting great insights from the current mission in Afghanistan and trying to evolve from there as a learning organization.

• (1545)

I have a limited focus at this time. It is supporting the theatre, sustaining that theatre, and reaching back here to Canada.

At this point I am ready to answer your questions with regard to my area of responsibility, while remaining in the non-classified domain.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll start our round of questions with the official opposition. Mr. Dosanjh.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh (Vancouver South, Lib.): I'm going to ask one or two questions, then maybe others can.

The uppermost issue in my mind is Afghanistan; you're deeply involved supporting our troops there. The question is about the Leopard tanks. I understand from the reports that the Leopard tank was in the process of being phased out over the last few years. I'd like to know the status of our force's capability to repair and maintain the Leopards in Afghanistan, since they were being phased out.

MGen Daniel Benjamin: The Leopard tanks, as well as all the support for them, were being consolidated mostly in the Wainwright and Moncton areas. The theatre has asked to have those tanks for force protection. The commander of CEFCOM will come in later this month, and maybe he can describe what they're going to be doing with them.

I'm being asked to send them, and that's what we are doing right now, with the full maintenance and support package that goes with them. We're making sure this package works. It is in working condition.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: The very specific question is are you confident we have the capability to both maintain and repair in the field, since these tanks were being phased out? I'm assuming, since they were being phased out, people weren't being trained in their maintenance or upkeep. I could be wrong in that assumption. If I am wrong, I'd like to be told. If I am correct in my assumption, do we have the repair and maintenance capacity on the field both in terms of however many tanks have been dispatched, and the number of tanks that are going to be added?

• (1550)

MGen Daniel Benjamin: The commander of the army will be better placed to answer the question on what he's been doing with the tanks in the last few years. As I said, they were consolidated in the Wainwright and Moncton areas and were being used in many army experiments there. They were still working. At this early stage, I would say the capability is there. It will depend on how they are used and what happens in the theatre. We'll see how that goes and we'll monitor the stocks to make sure they are properly sustained, from the Canadian perspective. Initially I would say we're on safe ground.

The Chair: Mr. Cannis, you've got just about four minutes.

Mr. John Cannis (Scarborough Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

General Benjamin, I have two questions.

You mentioned part of your responsibility is to project a force, if I may quote you. Can you elaborate a little on that and how you go about projecting this force and the requirements needed, as it applies to Afghanistan?

MGen Daniel Benjamin: We have a very good example right now where the government is asking that we send reinforcements into Afghanistan. The tanks are a good example, and we have many other capabilities as part of this package. So these are our new capabilities being projected into the theatre.

We're handling it by looking at what our lift capabilities are here in Canada. We have very few of them at the moment—primarily the Airbus, which you cannot put a tank in, and the CC-130 Hercules, which again you cannot put a tank in. So we're quite limited in terms of strategic lifts right now. I'm very anxious to see a strategic lift so we have more freedom of action and more autonomy from a Canadian perspective.

I have to look at other means to bring the equipment into the theatre. I don't decide on the flow. I'm told we'd like to have those pieces of equipment in theatre for such and such a date, and I try to find the best means to do that. In this instance we are using an An-124 through a contract agency, which can bring two tanks out of Canada. We have an air bridge using C-17s from the U.S.

We have a partnership with the U.S. called the integrated line of communication. We work together and they bring those tanks into Kandahar. So you can see that we are using many different possibilities to bring heavy equipment into the theatre. That's the first wave, and there are other waves coming in.

We're looking at sealift, because sealift is very often much more efficient. So it's a combination of airlift and sealift. We're trying to find the best flow to bring in this equipment and meet the operational requirements of the commander of the Expeditionary Force Command.

Mr. John Cannis: That leads to the second part of my question, which you partially answered. If we don't have the equipment—and you gave specific examples of cooperation with our U.S. partners—you're saying we lease equipment for a month or two.

Looking at some of this heavy airlift equipment, we know realistically that Afghanistan is before us. But from your perspective, what if we buy ten heavy airlifts and we don't have these types of missions for the next ten or fifteen years? What will those airlifts be used for? Will they be in Trenton, where we'll have to maintain them, etc.? Or is it more feasible to say that as theatres unfold—hopefully these types of Afghanistan theatres do not unfold—will the means be there if we need a ship or some heavy airlifts? What is the best way to spend our money? I think you know what I'm driving at.

The Chair: You have a really short time for a response.

MGen Daniel Benjamin: I wouldn't be concerned about where we are heading. The world isn't getting prettier out there. But let's say we don't have any missions because the government doesn't want us to be outside the country. Even in the Canada-first context and supporting our own troops here in Canada—even supporting Alert, for example, is a nightmare for me right now—those strategic lifts would be fundamental. It's a huge country, so they would be used extensively whatever the scenario.

• (1555)

The Chair: I had the opportunity to go to Alert from Trenton on a resupply mission a couple of years ago. Boy, those are brave souls who get on the planes every week to make that trip. I'll just say that.

Mr. Bachand.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Claude Bachand (Saint-Jean, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I would like to welcome you to the Committee, particularly you, General Benjamin. We are always proud to see that a guy from Saint-Jean has managed to reach the highest levels of the military command structure. Mr. Benjamin is one of my constituents. I hope he won his own elections in the last 13 years.

I just have a couple of questions for you. It is my impression that you are a services group. I see this as representing a client-salesman relationship, in that you are serving the people over there.

Who do you receive your orders from? For example, who decides when kleenex, weapons or ammunition are required? Is it Gen Fraser who calls you? Is it Gen Gauthier? Does Fraser call Gauthier, who then calls you to tell you they need this or that? How does the decision-making process work?

MGen Daniel Benjamin: When we begin a new mission, orders come directly from the strategic level—in other words, from the Chief of Defence, through strategic staff, who send us the guidelines. If it is an expeditionary mission, such as in Afghanistan, the responsibility is given to the Commander of the Expeditionary Forces, which would be Gen Gauthier.

As far as I'm concerned, my task is to develop the operational support Gen Gauthier requires. That is what our activities revolve around, such as setting up the theatre of operations. Once they are in theatre, it is really Gen Gauthier's theatre. They are the ones who check the levels of materiel that's available, and so on. When they see that materiel levels are beginning to drop, they tell me what they're missing and what the priority is. I have to ensure that is delivered to the theatre of operations. That is where I use my lifeline, my pipeline, airlift, and so on, to provide all the equipment they need in the appropriate timeframe.

Mr. Claude Bachand: I see.

And do you and Gen Gauthier have the same rank? Is he also a Major General?

MGen Daniel Benjamin: No, Gen Gauthier is a Lieutenant-General. It is one rank higher than mine.

Mr. Claude Bachand: He is one rank higher than you. So, he can order you to provide him with what he needs.

MGen Daniel Benjamin: Yes.

Mr. Claude Bachand: I understand. However, special operations forces have a different way of doing things. As I see it, they have a colonel acting as commander of these special forces. As a matter of fact, I'm having trouble understanding why a colonel would be responsible for all special forces.

Can he call and tell you not to reveal any state secrets? We know that their movements and location are secret information. If he says that they have arrived at a certain spot in Afghanistan and that they need this or that, can he ask you directly to provide him with what he needs?

MGen Daniel Benjamin: On the basis of our new force and command structure, all operations come under the authority of the Canadian Operational Support Command or the command structure at the expeditionary level.

Special forces report to those two commands, except in very rare cases where the commander reports directly to the Chief of the Defence Staff. In fact, it is in those rare cases that I will deal directly with him to provide support.

As a general rule, everything involved in it is top secret, and only some people are aware of the type of support being provided.

Mr. Claude Bachand: Several years ago, there was a whole debate on privatizing the supply chain, but to my knowledge, it is still under the full authority of the Department of National Defence, is it not?

MGen Daniel Benjamin: Yes, it is.

That is a fundamental component and I'm really very happy that it is still within our purview, especially since it is now under my command and the lessons learned directly in Afghanistan clearly show that that is essential.

Indeed, these people are required to provide operational support at all times, day and night, just as our people do in theatre. If ammunition is needed, I have civilian employees in my organization who will work overtime to ensure that ammunition gets to theatre within the appropriate timeframe.

That is what operational requirements demand, and I'm very pleased we were able to prevent that from being privatized, because I don't think contracting it out to the private sector would have allowed us to provide the proper response for a request of this type.

Mr. Claude Bachand: Absolutely.

Now, having been in a theatre of operations a couple of times, I also know that the military often relies on private companies. ATCO Frontec comes to mind.

Is it the same thing in Afghanistan at the present time? It was the case in Bosnia-Herzegovina. In other words, are we using the services of private firms? And when we ask a private firm to do something, is that firm given a turnkey contract whereby it has to get its own supplies, or do you supply the private firm in theatre?

• (1600)

MGen Daniel Benjamin: We have the major CANCAP contract, which was awarded to SNC-Lavalin, and some people are currently working in Afghanistan.

That is the case when a theatre of operations becomes more and more mature, such as at the military air base at Kandahar Airport. The Americans have Kellogg, Brown and Root, which is sort of the equivalent of CANCAP. They can take on certain duties that our military personnel carried out previously, thus freeing up the necessary military personnel to support our missions over the long term. The more mature it is, the more we try to rely on these people.

Mr. Claude Bachand: You try to use private companies to a greater extent?

MGen Daniel Benjamin: We support them and they are part of our operations. We are also there to protect them. It's a whole package. We treat them as one of our own.

Mr. Claude Bachand: But in that case, are they only supplying the manpower? If you need lumber to build buildings, for example, are you the ones that provide that to them, or do they have a contract and arrange to supply the materials themselves?

MGen Daniel Benjamin: There is an acquisition process for all kinds of materiel, whether it's water, oil, or lumber. It's really fairly complex, because it's sometimes a multinational effort, whereas in other cases, it may be only a national requirement. For example, when we need lumber, it's often a national requirement. In that case, we will deal with Koblenz, where there is a detachment from Public Works and Government Services Canada. That is often where we get construction materials that Kellogg, Brown and Root cannot provide within the necessary timeframe.

Mr. Claude Bachand: What percentage of procurement in Kandahar comes from Canada? Is it possible to purchase certain services or goods directly in theatre, in the country where the operations are being conducted? In Kandahar, it must be a special situation. There must not be many Mercedes-Benz dealers there, if the commander needs to get from one place to the other. Local companies can't provide those vehicles. Are you the ones providing everything in theatre?

MGen Daniel Benjamin: Supplies come from all across the world, and it's based on the different types of materials, commodities, and so on. Every item is managed differently.

I can give you an example. Food is currently being provided by the Americans, through Kellogg, Brown and Root, which has a contract with the US Defense Logistics Agency. That company provides fresh food in Kandahar to everyone.

It's truly a multinational system. We can serve everyone operating in the same camp and create synergies, rather than every group having an individual contract for its own kitchens. So, all the commodities are looked at one by one. Things are evolving now in the sense that the Americans are currently in charge of support at the base in Kandahar. That will migrate to NATO starting next summer. As a result, there will be major changes in terms of contractual suppliers and we are trying to manage that in a comprehensive fashion.

[English]

The Chair: I'm sorry, Claude, you're time's up. You're a little bit overtime, but thanks for the quick response.

Mr. Christopherson.

Mr. David Christopherson (Hamilton Centre, NDP): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, General and Colonel, for an excellent presentation.

I'd like to start with sort of an open-ended question. Right now, what's the single biggest challenge you face in providing for the Afghanistan theatre?

MGen Daniel Benjamin: My single biggest challenge is the length of the line of communications. It is 11,000 kilometres, so it's quite a challenge to sustain such an operation at the current level from Canada, especially on the types of items that can only be found in Canada, such as spare parts to our vehicles, and so on.

This is quite a challenge, especially when we don't have our own strategic lift. So we are really learning a lot from this, and hopefully we'll do things much better in the future in this regard. But it is a very long line of communication between those two countries.

Mr. David Christopherson: Given the current supply chain, are you confident that you can supply adequately until the end of the current or the renewed mission, which would be February 2009?

MGen Daniel Benjamin: Yes, definitely, we can truly sustain this mission. There's no problem there.

I would say that we are the envy of most countries dealing in Afghanistan, in the sense that our supply chain, our end-to-end process, is de facto purple. It caters to army, navy, and air force needs, so it's great. It's one person dealing with it, which countries such as the U.S. and U.K. don't have. They have this inefficiency of the air force bringing their own thing, the army bringing their own thing, and having three different distribution systems for the same goods.

So we are the envy of many for having a single chain that's purple, and this is due to the integration we had back in the 1968-72 timeframe.

• (1605)

Mr. David Christopherson: Okay, thank you.

If you receive an order this evening when you leave here that you are to open up a supply chain into Darfur, because we are part of a UN mission going there, would you be able to respond to that mission right now with what you have?

MGen Daniel Benjamin: Yes. We've already been asked similar questions in different theatres, and there are some support trades right now that could not go into a different theatre of operation. We can reinforce Afghanistan, but we cannot go into any other theatre of operation.

A key one is health services. In terms of our capabilities in health services, all we have is what we call role two, an advanced surgical capacity—and only one. We have taken a lead role in Afghanistan in this regard, and we are stretching this capability to its maximum. We can sustain it, but we are stretching it. So if we are to go into a different theatre of operation, then the government will have to manage the rest. Do we send our soldiers without guaranteed medical support? That is a very difficult decision to take.

My recommendation is, I cannot do it. Are you sure that you want to do it? Or is another country going to come in and cough up? Maybe if another country comes in, you could do that. But health service is clearly a showstopper at this point in time. This is why I'm briefing the Chief of the Defence Staff very soon on the capability shortfall we have and have to address on the support side, so that we can de facto support our lines.

Mr. David Christopherson: Thank you.

I'm new to subbing on this committee, so forgive me for asking rather naive questions. But I'll ask anyway.

My understanding is that normally when the U.S. does their planning, they can do at least two, maybe even three, major fronts, if necessary. It seems you just basically said that we can't go anywhere else. How healthy is it that a nation would commit itself so far that it has no latitude to go anywhere else under any other circumstances? I realize that's a little out of your.... Still, from where you sit, how much do we leave ourselves shorthanded as a nation, in terms of our ability to do anything beyond this one mission?

MGen Daniel Benjamin: We are recovering from several cuts to the support capabilities in the Canadian Forces, so—

Mr. David Christopherson: When did they happen?

MGen Daniel Benjamin: It started with the integration back in 1968-72, when we consolidated support. We closed a CFE base, which was our foundation to support operations overseas. Closing this was a big hit. In the mid-1990s, we cut about 30% to 50% of the support capabilities on different bases and wings. The overall support structure of the Canadian Forces has been hit due to the force reduction and the cuts in the 1990s, so we are recovering from this.

This is why the Chief of the Defence Staff asked me to look at this and find solutions—and find solutions very rapidly. Those solutions can be more people, more capability, risk management, and dealing with other nations. This is what I'm preparing for him to get out of this dilemma—and very fast, like within the next year. Obviously we've got to sort that out very rapidly.

Mr. David Christopherson: Are you currently making contingency plans for the possibility of Canada staying beyond February 2009?

MGen Daniel Benjamin: I'm just supporting current operations. So these are a much higher level and I'm not involved in any of those plans.

Mr. David Christopherson: That's fine.

I understand that you use a lot of local Afghans for some of the logistical support on the ground. Can you just give me a sense of how many there are of those? What sort of vetting process do you go through to ensure that you're satisfied that you have the security you need in terms of any folks you're bringing in? This is for the obvious reasons; I don't have to explain that.

MGen Daniel Benjamin: I would not have the answer to this, because this is in theatre right now, so the commander of Expeditionary Force Command may have those figures. My focus is on the CANCAP people. We have our own Canadian civilians as part of CANCAP, and the support agency CFPSA in there as civilians working with us. I'm not aware of the others; that's local in-theatre, so I don't monitor that. Sorry.

Mr. David Christopherson: Thank you.

How's my time, Chair?

The Chair: Perfect. You have just a little time left if you want to use it, a couple of seconds.

•(1610)

Mr. David Christopherson: Well, I will. I'll push forward, then.

Let me ask you this. Do you think you can adequately go beyond 2009 without major purchases from where you sit, or is there enough infrastructure to take us there?

MGen Daniel Benjamin: That is a very difficult question, because the opponent has a voice in this, and things are changing very rapidly over there.

We're quite agile. I'm very proud of the operations we're doing, and we're modifying. So there will be more purchases, most likely, I would say, to better protect our soldiers and to make sure they have the proper tools. So we are adapting and we'll see how this goes.

The Chair: Thank you.

Over to the government side: Mr. Hiebert.

Mr. Russ Hiebert (South Surrey—White Rock—Cloverdale, CPC): Thank you, sir.

Thank you, General, for joining us today.

As you know, our government has communicated its intentions to the public to purchase medium to heavy-lift helicopters, and I'm wondering if you could explain to the committee the benefit in terms of increased safety and security that these helicopters would provide our soldiers.

MGen Daniel Benjamin: From my perspective, these are really fundamental. The construct in theatre has changed. Our forces were very much consolidated into the Kandahar airfield initially, with a few camps here and there, but now that we're going out more with forward-operating bases, then it changes the construct on how you operate in that theatre.

If it's the case, then the support has to change, and what's happening is we have many support convoys that are moving from Kandahar in long areas to resupply those forward-operating bases. You know right now the type of threat that we're facing, so every one of those convoys is a key target. In fact, that's what we are learning from this theatre. It's not only combatants who are targets; everybody is a target in this type of asymmetric warfare, especially support trade logisticians and so on who are doing those convoys.

We used to call them resupply convoys, and now we call them combat logistic patrols, because they have to be fully embedded into the operations with the proper force protection. These are very difficult to do, and they are being challenged day in and day out, and being shot at day in and day out. So using the medium- to heavy-lift helicopter would alleviate many of those road moves we are doing to resupply those entities spread over the area.

Obviously, that helicopter would not do it by itself; it has to be a force package. And we can have the help of other nations to make sure this group of helicopters has the proper protection to do the air delivery. Air delivery would really help out in this process.

Bringing back casualties is also fundamental. Now we rely very much on our neighbours' assets, on our allies' assets to do that, but at one point it's our own casualties and it would be good to have our own autonomy. This is why the Chief of the Defence Staff is

pressing very much to get those capabilities very fast. We need those to do a much better job and to make our people much safer.

With this, I would say precision airdrop could also be greatly beneficial from a support perspective for those FOBs. All those aspects have to be looked at, and we have to improve our capabilities based on the type of threat we're facing.

Mr. Russ Hiebert: My next question is more of an open-ended question, and that is, what other equipment do you think would be helpful to this particular mission?

MGen Daniel Benjamin: That's a wide-open question. We've been working really hard, since I would say a year ago, in looking at the type of threat we would be facing, the mitigating strategies, the force protection measures, and type of equipment we should purchase. We've been doing a lot.

We have great, great support from all government agencies. We've been bringing a lot of urgent requirements in theatre right now that have proven to be tremendous enablers. In fact other countries envy us, with Nyala RG-31, for example, which is a fundamental piece of kit. I brought it directly from South Africa into the theatre. They did the training, and they're running with it.

There are all sorts of kit that we've been pushing to procure throughout the process in that theatre. It's very much a push system. As we learn more and see that we need better protection here or there, then we adapt to it. If it's a repair to a current piece of kit, or procurement of another one, then we proceed. We have tremendous support in this regard. So it's evolving.

Can I predict where it will be in three to six months? No. But obviously we have the mechanism in place to identify those lessons learned to make sure that our soldiers get the best kit to do the job.

•(1615)

Mr. Russ Hiebert: Chair, I'll share the balance of my time with my colleague.

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

Thank you, General, and thank you, gentlemen, for joining us.

As we all know, operations is the rose and logistics is the stem upon which it grows.

I just have a comment with regard to strategic airlift and the use of it in North America. You may or may not have been involved with it—probably not—but all the heavy equipment for the ice storm and the floods in Manitoba was moved by U.S. Air Force C-17s. It would be nice to have our own.

We do a lot of contracting with civilian and other military carriers. What are your biggest challenges in that with respect to dealing with the Ukrainians, the U.S. Air Force, the Brits, or whoever? How well is that working, and what challenges are you facing?

MGen Daniel Benjamin: In Kandahar?

Mr. Laurie Hawn: No, in contracting to get equipment from Canada to Kandahar.

MGen Daniel Benjamin: That's working really, really well. We have what we call the out-of-Canada network, through the military and defence attachés, embassies, and so on. We optimize this network to really get to the equipment, have the flight clearances and so on, and bring the equipment directly from the manufacturer to the theatre. That is working beautifully.

Mr. Laurie Hawn: What limitations does the use of the Antonov pose in terms of the airfields into which it is operable?

MGen Daniel Benjamin: The Antonov cannot land in Kandahar. That is a big, big showstopper from our perspective. The only big one that can land right now is the C-17, and that is fundamental to bring tanks, for example, into the theatre. We have the Il-76, but again, we cannot put the tanks in it, so the C-17 is fundamental to land close to where our troops are in Kandahar. Otherwise, you have to go to different locations, such as Kabul. As such, you have a road move from Kabul to Kandahar that in itself is very risky, very lengthy, and difficult to do.

So we always have to find the best route to bring the equipment in. The Antonov cannot get into Kandahar, and that's a showstopper in itself.

Mr. Laurie Hawn: At the risk of revealing what colour my underwear is, what's our capability to support a CF-18 deployment to Afghanistan?

MGen Daniel Benjamin: I think you would have to ask the commander of the air force where he sits on that right now. I know we were looking at six-pack. These things are well above my pay grade.

If we were to move them in, then I'll make sure we support them the best we can. I know in Kandahar they needed runway repairs to guarantee that we could use them. I'm not sure if that has been done and whether the CF-18s could operate from there.

The greater the integrated effect of army, navy, and air force assets into a theatre, the three-D approach, having CIDA and DFAIT as part of the team and having a whole-of-government impact into areas is really a key strategic issue. I would say, the more we do of this, the better we are.

We're really getting a voice at the table. Everywhere I go in the world—because I'm the senior support officer in the forces—I'm being asked to link with all those people. We have a voice at the table now, and they are taking us very, very seriously. We are having a strategic impact, which was not necessarily the case in the past.

The Chair: Thank you.

That ends the first round. We'll go to the second round, with five minutes to the official opposition and then the government.

Mr. McGuire, for five minutes.

Hon. Joe McGuire: Yes, Mr. Chair.

Could you explain more about the three-D approach that you started to talk about? Is it carried on simultaneously with the military side? How much planning goes into that? For example, for Operation Medusa, when you're planning the military side, is another group coordinating the development side at the same time? When do you implement that part of the operation?

MGen Daniel Benjamin: I wish I could explain, but obviously I'm supporting the theatre from here and I'm not much involved in the three-D aspects in that theatre.

When Michel Gauthier from the Expeditionary Force Command comes here, he could detail all the work he's doing with CIDA, DFAIT, and other government agencies that have an impact as a three-D entity in that theatre. It's his theatre.

Hon. Joe McGuire: You don't involve yourself in that theatre.

MGen Daniel Benjamin: At my level, no, sir, I'm not involved. If they want key pieces of kit brought into the theatre and they ask us to bring it there, then it would be part of our pipeline to bring it there.

Hon. Joe McGuire: Do you think you're getting all the support from the government that you need for operations?

• (1620)

MGen Daniel Benjamin: Thus far, we're getting tremendous support from the whole of government. I'm getting great support from the Canadian Forces perspective, the Chief of Defence Staff, and the Expeditionary Force Command.

Operations are number one. It's not a financial issue. It's making sure that our people have the best kits and that we are making it happen. We're working the best we can with our command to make sure the kits get there in a timely fashion to meet the operational requirements.

Hon. Joe McGuire: If you were going to improve your kit, what would you ask for?

MGen Daniel Benjamin: Pardon me?

Hon. Joe McGuire: If you wanted to improve your kit or the supplies, what part of the operation would you improve on, if you had your druthers?

MGen Daniel Benjamin: From a support perspective, obviously, the key one is strategic lift. To me, it is really fundamental to have freedom of action and much more autonomy, not only for Afghanistan.

A good example is the disaster assistance response team that we are sending. It's making quite a difference. We were always relying on the Antonov, and everybody asks for those planes when you have a disaster. It's never guaranteed that you will get this type of aircraft.

Having our own autonomy in terms of strategic lift, not to cater to all but at least for the basics, to respond very rapidly to a crisis and to respond very rapidly to a need in a theatre such as Afghanistan is fundamental to me.

Hon. Joe McGuire: The decision made by Minister Hellyer forty years ago is now coming into play in a positive way as far as coordinating the three forces.

MGen Daniel Benjamin: Looking at the integration back then and looking at what the Chief of Defence Staff is doing with the new command-and-control structure, it's again building on that. I think it's a great enhancement.

I've been in operations for a long time, both as an army officer and now as commander of the Operational Support Command. I'm very proud of what we are doing right now in Afghanistan and of the outstanding work of our soldiers. We are learning a great deal from this. It's key to learn and adapt and not to fight the last war.

Hon. Joe McGuire: We're proud of you too.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: You still have a minute and a half.

Hon. Joe McGuire: That's fine.

The Chair: Thanks.

We'll move to Mr. Hawn.

Mr. Laurie Hawn: Thanks again, Mr. Chair.

Again, I have a point. There was Hellyer integration and there's Hillier integration. Having lived through the Hellyer integration, the first part of his name spelled it out, and it was entirely different from the Hillier integration.

I'm sorry if I confused anybody.

On hospital facilities, we're obviously taking casualties in greater numbers, which we knew we would, because of the area we're operating in, which we believe is necessary. What are we doing to upgrade the hospital facilities? You have to get the stuff there, but are you aware of any plans to upgrade our hospital facilities in Kandahar, in theatre, to process our own folks locally?

MGen Daniel Benjamin: We have a world-class facility in Kandahar right now, which is a multinational role three medical facility. It is multinational but Canadian led, and I have visited it. It's really outstanding. It's really great.

We're able to stabilize the patients, and it's not only Canadians; it's Afghan national police, our allies, and so on. It's really multinational. They are really stabilizing the patients, and if they need to be brought back, then we go to Landstuhl. In Landstuhl, again, that's a great hospital and we are getting great care out of it. And if they have to be brought back to Canada, then obviously we go into our own system here.

So we are learning a great deal out of this. I think we have a great facility in the role three and the advanced surgical centre that we have here in our own capability and inventory. We need more of these, and that was going to be my point to the chief. If we are to have two theatres, we need more of these and we need more specialists to be able to sustain that. That is really a cornerstone to our capabilities, from the Canadian Forces perspective.

But the whole process of repatriating both the remains and the casualties is really fundamental, and we are learning a great deal out of this. We've had doctrine in the past—I think that emanated from the First and Second World Wars and the Korean War—but things we have not practised to that extent. So we are learning the lessons.

I want to establish a personnel support group that really focuses on what we are learning from a personnel perspective: how can we best support our people in theatre? And it's not only military; it's also, as I said, the CFPSA civilians, CANCAP civilians, and others who are in that theatre. How can we best support them, and when they come

back to Canada, how can we best reintegrate those people into Canada? That's quite a shock. They left as young soldiers and they're coming back as veterans, and the reintegration is something very fundamental.

So I want to make sure, from an operational level, strategic level, lessons learned on how we best support our people, that I'm quite involved in the process. I will be working with chief military personnel to establish something that is really learning from what we're seeing now.

• (1625)

Mr. Laurie Hawn: You're talking about establishing a new personnel support group. Obviously those functions are being done, but you're talking about establishing a separate group that's obviously identified with those functions. Is that correct?

MGen Daniel Benjamin: Yes, exactly.

Mr. Laurie Hawn: Okay.

On missing links, every operation has missing links. We've touched on some of them. But in terms of equipment, personnel, and plans, do you have any missing links right now that you need help with?

We've talked a little bit about equipment, plans, and personnel. Where do you need help?

MGen Daniel Benjamin: The equipment piece is going really well. It's the personnel piece now, especially with the number of casualties—quite a big toll on the infantrymen especially. This is changing the way we are sustaining the operations. We lost a lot of people. We lost almost half a platoon in one event. So how can you bring them, a whole platoon, from here in Canada to that theatre? I will facilitate the flow, but this is what we are looking at and the sustainment ratio of all those different MOCs or occupations to support the theatre.

So the personnel piece is the critical one. I think it's our most important asset, and that's the one we have to focus on right now. It's quite demanding to sustain such a level of activity in Afghanistan at the same time as we're trying to beef up the ranks and increase the establishment here in Canada with all the instructors that are required. This is more of a strategic issue that the Chief of the Defence Staff is leading with his strategic advisers, but it is a difficult issue because it's the same people; it's the same senior people who basically have to do both: perform in operations, and at the same time be asked to come back and be an instructor at the school. So it's a big challenge.

The Chair: I'm afraid that's right on the money.

We'll go over to Mr. Bouchard, and then back to the government.

[Translation]

Mr. Robert Bouchard (Chicoutimi—Le Fjord, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you for your presentation, Major General Benjamin. You have given us an overview of your responsibilities at the Canadian Operational Support Command, and it is clear that this is a major operation involving a vast organization.

My question is twofold. First, could you quantify your staff resources? Second, what is the major challenge you have had to meet in supporting the mission in Afghanistan?

MGen Daniel Benjamin: Could you clarify what you mean by staff resources? In what area?

Mr. Robert Bouchard: What I mean is that as Commander of Canadian Operational Support Command, how many people do you have directly under you?

MGen Daniel Benjamin: Almost 2,000 military personnel report directly to my command. Most of them are called on to go into theatre on very short notice. The major challenge for them is getting into theatre to provide their assistance and expertise, and then coming back after three, four, five or six weeks.

It's what we call "in and out". These people are constantly going back and forth. They travel a great deal. They take their support-related expertise to theatre, to help the people on the ground to properly structure the operations. So, the major challenge is the pace these people have to keep up.

At the present time, we have adequate staff. On the other hand, if we had to open up a second line of operation, current staff levels would be inadequate. That's why we have to resolve the problem of operational support personnel possessing the necessary expertise.

However, that does not mean that I have to have at my disposal all the weapons and all the necessary operational support personnel. First and foremost, I need people with the appropriate expertise, and then I can ask the army, the air force and the navy to provide me with support and beef up my team, so that we can carry out our work in theatre. That is the relationship that I maintain with those three environments and that allows me to carry out my missions.

In the current context, it is difficult to bring in support personnel currently based in garrisons such as the one in Bagotville, Montreal or Valcartier. Support has been cut back so much in recent years that these people have to wear two or three hats. If I take significant numbers of them away, we may end up creating a critical situation as regards operations on a base such as Bagotville, or elsewhere.

If we want to get these people into theatre, we have to find a way to cover during their absence. I am trying to look at this to see who can be freed up. If they are wearing a uniform, as much as possible, it should be to support operations where required.

How can we support our base and squadron commanders in their day-to-day work? Very often, that work can be carried out by a civilian contractor for the six months or the year during which military staff is away working in theatre. That is the dynamic we are currently living with in terms of our staff and the existing arrangement for the Canadian Forces as a whole.

• (1630)

Mr. Robert Bouchard: My second question has to do with the possibility that the Afghanistan mission will be extended past 2009.

I've heard a lot of comments—you may have heard them as well—suggesting that the mission could last between five and ten years.

My question is twofold. First of all, what timeframe does your current work cover? Are you working on things that will take place a year from now? Does your mission support planning go beyond 2009?

MGen Daniel Benjamin: As regards Afghanistan, I work on the basis of what is needed today and what the Commander of the Expeditionary Forces asks me to provide. So, I am providing support to him on a day-to-day basis. The people who are in theatre are carrying out an operational campaign. In order to get the equipment to them quickly, I ask the expeditionary forces to give me an accurate assessment of the ammunition, rations or any other supplies they may require to carry out their campaign for the next week, two weeks or three weeks, a month, and so on. My minimum deadline is therefore three days, which is the time needed to get the equipment over there quickly.

However, from a strategic perspective, working with the Chief of the Defence Staff, I'm looking at what is happening not only in Afghanistan, but across the globe. What's going to happen in the next two, five, ten, fifteen or twenty years? Are we equipped to deal appropriately with a possible crisis? We propose certain options to the Government to ensure that we can meet its expectations.

So, we plan on a global scale, and my role is to facilitate forces deployment across the globe. For example, if a mission is being carried out in Africa, I have to ascertain what the best way of getting in there is. Getting into a country requires a great deal of time and effort. Memoranda of understanding have to be signed with the various countries concerned, and securing the necessary clearances may take several months.

In terms of support, I have to be ahead of the ball; I have to be proactive. If there were to be a mission in Africa, in the Caribbean, in Haiti, in the Pacific region or somewhere else, how would we get in there? I determine what the best points of entry are to countries across the globe where we have to deploy our forces, either by sea or by air.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Gallant, then Mr. Cannis.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant (Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Canadians will recall the crisis under the former Liberal government with *GTS Katie*, a ship that was hired by a private company to bring Canadian tanks, weapons, and other supplies back from Kosovo. At the time it was about 10% of Canada's total military inventory. What assurances can you give us that a similar occurrence will not occur in shipping Canadian equipment now?

MGen Daniel Benjamin: Obviously, my command was not created when this thing happened, so I'm not privy to any of those details. But I know individuals who were very much involved on the movement side and the process, and they have captured lessons learned, they have told me, and we are making sure this does not happen a second time. This is why we have many different means to bring our equipment overseas. I have discussed already the contractual arrangements through Antonov, the ILOC of the U.S., and we also have a NATO air bridge. We have an agreement with the Coalition of the Willing in Europe, called SALIS, which is bringing us other assets, and the same thing on the sea side.

We're optimizing the worldwide strategic lift capabilities, if you wish, to make sure we don't end up in the situation we were in with *GTS Katie*.

• (1635)

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Thank you.

To what extent are civilian defence employees deployed to Afghanistan as part of the Canadian military supply chain?

MGen Daniel Benjamin: Right now, there are CANCAP individuals who are augmenting the supply detachment in Afghanistan, so de facto those CANCAP employees who are civilians are working side by side with us to support the operation on the Kandahar airfield, which is mostly secure there. So we have civilians there, and we are taking care of them as if they were military.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: How about civilian Department of National Defence employees?

MGen Daniel Benjamin: We have both. We have CANCAP, our contractor. We have CPESA, which is an agency of National Defence, but still an agency. We have public servants who go on visits here and there, for studies on part of the lessons learned. For example, DRDC have people there. So we are supporting all four different entities in the theatre.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: During the previous missions, such as the one in Bosnia, the former government had been phasing out the use of civilian defence employees in theatre, opting more for private contractors. Are we finding that's the case in Afghanistan, or are we staying more with civilian defence employees and these CANCAP people?

MGen Daniel Benjamin: In terms of shaping the future, that is something I'm looking at, because we have great public servants on our bases and wings that I know personally are very willing to contribute and go in a theatre, as long as we can guarantee the proper security there. I think we should allow that to happen, because this would reinforce the support capabilities of the Canadian Forces and all departments as a whole, not only being military from the regular military or from reservists, but capitalizing on our public servants as another capability we could bring in theatre when the theatre is mature enough. If the theatre is mature enough for a CANCAP or a CPESA agent, then my recommendation is that it's also mature enough for a public servant. I will be working very closely with our associate deputy minister of civilian resources to see if this can happen and how we can best support and protect those people in a theatre and all of the aspects that this entails.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Where, if at all, on your org chart on page three does a regiment or a 2 Service Battalion, for example, fit in?

MGen Daniel Benjamin: When you look at the overall construct, they are not part of my.... The 2 Service Battalion on slide three are part of the army, so that would be under the Chief of the Land Staff. It's in the middle. There is a purple box with CLS, CAS, CMP, and CMS, so the commander of the army is Chief of Land Staff, CLS. The CLS is a big organization, the army, land force command, which has many units, including 2 Service Battalion. An entity like the 2 Service Battalion is what we call a close support type of unit, and this is to the army.

In my job, I don't do garrison support. I'm not involved on how we support our bases and wings throughout Canada. I don't touch that. I don't touch the integral support that is part of a unit. Let's say the RCD or the RCR have a squadron that works with them and supports them; I don't deal with that. I don't deal with 2 Service Battalion or any of those battalions that provide close support to an army capability. However, when you're at the theatre, like in Kandahar, we must be able to connect with them and make sure they understand where they're going to get their water and so on, so it's more of a connecting role. The theatre level connecting to these entities is fundamental. They don't work for me, but I will be connecting with them when they deploy in operations.

The Chair: Thanks.

Mr. Cannis, and then we'll go back over to the government.

Mr. John Cannis: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

General Benjamin, I'm just going to pick up from when I asked the first question in terms of your responsibility to project a force. You've explained that very well. To continue on, as you plan and project the needed force, as you described it, can you please go back for me to, I believe, 1995, when the changes were occurring? Do you recall specifically that in the 1995 budget, well over \$13 billion was allocated for your new equipment, under the Liberal government? Of course, you knew the equipment, but we didn't know what your needs were. Given that some of this equipment takes time, can you please explain to me or elaborate?

Because you have to go out and contract certain equipment that we don't have today—the 2005 budget, I apologize—what equipment did you identify then that is forthcoming, and what equipment do you need today that is on order, is to be ordered, or is in the process of being ordered? What are we anticipating for today's theatre and for whatever might happen in the future?

•(1640)

MGen Daniel Benjamin: Procurement of equipment is truly a strategic-level issue. Obviously, my command just started on January 1, so I was not privy to any of those discussions. Right now, what I can do is say what the lessons learned from the operation in Afghanistan are, and with those comes the operational requirement from a support perspective. We can then pass on this support requirement to those who do the procurement and those who are involved in establishing the defence capabilities plan and what is going to be procured as part of those capabilities. I can have an influence in this, but I cannot really answer your question on what we did two years back or—

Mr. John Cannis: What are we lacking today in that specific theatre in terms of equipment? Are you aware of what equipment we're lacking today?

MGen Daniel Benjamin: We've discussed some of the key pieces, and from a support perspective I said that strategic lift is fundamental. The medium- to heavy-lift helicopter is also fundamental from a support perspective.

In terms of combat capabilities, you'll have to ask either the commander of Expeditionary Forces Command—it's his theatre, and I'm not aware of what he sees there—and all of the army, navy, and air force capabilities with that.

Mr. John Cannis: So from what knowledge you do have, have we moved the file or the envelope forward, closer to securing that procurement for the military—strategic airlift, helicopters, as you just pointed out? Has that file moved forward? If you are aware, how forward is it?

MGen Daniel Benjamin: The procurement of the five big-ticket items, from a support perspective, is fundamental, and they are moving really fast. And faster is better from my perspective, because it will be much easier to do my job.

Mr. John Cannis: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: We'll go back over to Mr. Calkins.

Mr. Blaine Calkins (Wetaskiwin, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you, General, for being here today. It's quite interesting.

I have a whole list of questions that have already been asked, so I've had to make some up on the fly. If they seem disjointed, it's only to follow up on conversations and bits of information that you've already given us.

When it comes to your command, you said you had about 2,000 people in that command structure. I'm just wondering what issues you're facing currently, today, as far as staffing is concerned? Are you losing highly trained staff because the job market in various parts of the country is very hot right now? I'm not sure what the skill sets are that you would have. Obviously there's logistics, with a lot of paper shuffling, I would imagine. I'm just wondering how your command structure has adjusted from a staffing perspective and a recruitment retention perspective. How are you going to fit in with the whole growth of the armed forces in the future?

MGen Daniel Benjamin: I have a dashboard, if you will, for looking at my personnel, and that is something I'm starting to track

very closely. From my perspective, attrition could become a problem, so retention of our talent would be really fundamental.

It's not only from the logistics perspective, but also it's throughout the whole forces, especially with our demography. If you look at our current demography, we have a lot of people who are getting very close to retirement or one of the key gates to really take your liberation. If we lose those people and do not have new blood coming in to be able to take on those responsibilities fast, we have a gap there that has to be bridged. Retention of that key personnel is really fundamental from my perspective, and we must retain these for the next three to four years at least to bridge that gap, so that we can pass on the experience to those who have the talent to pick it up. It's very fundamental.

If we look at the former data on attrition, I think we've been doing very well, and chief military personnel could reinforce those points. But, on average, they were saying there is about 6.8% attrition, which is great for any industry in Canada, apparently. I'm not an expert on this, but that's what I've heard. But I would be afraid that with the current demography and having a lot of people close to those gates, it may go higher than that, so I am tracking it very closely and I'm trying to put pressure on my superiors to make sure we have proper retention tools for those people, especially in the next three to four years.

As I stated earlier, there's high demand for those people in operations. The personnel tempo is very high. At the same time, those same people are very often asked to be instructors at the school for the new people coming in, so that is putting a lot of strain on our people.

•(1645)

Mr. Blaine Calkins: In the next question I'm going to move off that a little bit. I'm glad to know you have some succession planning and so on going on. That's encouraging. Based on the current load that your department is facing with the continuing operations we have and the relative newness of the four different command structures that have taken place, obviously you would want to have your command structure in a position to be able to respond effectively to the wishes of the other three command structures that we talked about.

Given the fact that you've said basically we're strained right now from an expeditionary force or continued operations overseas, that also begs the question in my mind about our ability to respond domestically through Canada Command. Given your department's current workload in supporting the operations in Afghanistan, what testing have you done or have there been plans drawn up and tested so that, for example, if we had a major earthquake or a tsunami or something like that domestically, you can make sure you can support Canada Command with the remaining assets you have?

MGen Daniel Benjamin: I'm not only supporting the Expeditionary Force Command, but I'm also supporting Canada Command. We are reviewing all the different plans to respond to these types of crises and consequence-management types of operations. We are working with them and making sure that we can cater to all of those needs.

Personally, my biggest fear would be a terrible earthquake in the British Columbia area, especially if we lose the airfields. If that's the case, then how can we bring in the people on the ground to do the job? Force projection, which is very key to my job, and bringing all those people from across Canada to that potential theatre could be quite a challenge. This is why we are working with Canada Command and going through the scenarios, the war gaming, and so on to make sure that if this happens, we do that; if that happens, we do this; and so on, so that we're well tied in.

We're looking, for example, at the Olympics coming in 2010 and at balancing all the resources based on the demand overseas and the demand in Canada. We are balancing it out. Obviously all commands are only eight months old, especially mine. The others have a little more maturity. They were created a bit earlier, but no more than a year, so we are learning through that process and refining all of those plans all together. We have a great synergy and a great construct to especially respond to these, so that it would not be an ad hoc reaction as we may have seen in the past.

The Chair: I'm sorry, Blaine, that's it. I know you just got started.

We're scheduled to go back to the official opposition.

Opposition, pass. Government, pass. Bloc, pass. The last spot is then for the New Democratic Party.

You get the last word, so make it good.

Mr. David Christopherson: I'll do my best, Mr. Chair; thanks.

I just wanted to pick up on the last question, because it dovetails closely to where I was earlier.

Here's what I'm curious about. I said that if we had another theatre that was international, you would have difficulty being able to open up your supply chain, mainly on the health side—being able, if I understand correctly, to provide the health services—and yet if it was B.C., you were okay. I'm assuming that would be because you'd then utilize, if necessary, the internal health care system we have in Canada; you can tap into that and make do.

• (1650)

MGen Daniel Benjamin: Right.

Mr. David Christopherson: I still am left wondering what steps you would need to take if something happened in the world, assuming it was a motherhood kind of thing and that whatever it was, we needed to be there and wanted to be there; it wasn't something that was debated in the House, and everybody was cool with the idea that we had to do it. What steps would be necessary for you to immediately be able to respond? In other words, roughly what would you need to be able to buy, beg, borrow, lease, or steal to be able to respond, again assuming the entire nation wanted to be there and felt we had to be there? How would you do it?

The Chair: Before you respond, it is a little outside the parameters of our study. However, I'll allow you to answer, because it does relate to our being involved in Afghanistan. Whatever our limits are beyond that.... It is a little bit outside the scope of what we invited you to comment on. If you have something to say, go ahead.

MGen Daniel Benjamin: If government tells us to go and open a theatre at this place, then obviously there would have been planning within our department to tell us where the restrictions, limitations,

and risks were and how the risks would be managed. If they say to go, then we would go into very great detail to make sure that we could mitigate the different risks.

Health services is one, for example, so we could find out if France would come and help us out by providing the medical support. I was a contingent commander in Africa. I had my health services provided by the French, and they were great, so there is one way of doing it. We could also do it by contract; I know our CANCAP has some capabilities. We would be going into mitigating strategies in great detail to make sure we could do it without undue risk.

Obviously it's not for me to decide. From a Canadian Forces perspective, the Chief of Defence Staff would have to assess this risk and bring it to the minister and Prime Minister. The government will have to take the risk based on the fact that maybe we don't have all the capabilities accordingly, but there are potential mitigating strategies, and that is what we would be focusing on.

Mr. David Christopherson: Excellent. Thank you so much.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: I don't think it's a fair question for you. If it isn't, just tell me if I wrap up after my intervention with the member for the NDP.

As we've gone through this operation, it has changed a bit. I am more interested in what's happening on the ground and anything that's there today but wasn't there yesterday. How does that information get back to you? Do you get any kind of advance warning that we're going to need 14 tanks over here in a week, so brace yourself, or is it shorter than that? Is it a day-to-day communication that you have to get that supply over there?

MGen Daniel Benjamin: This is obviously an Expeditionary Force Command issue, and they are tracking this issue very rapidly. From a holistic perspective, we have a team for lessons learned in that theatre. They are monitoring every event, every incident, every happening there, consolidating from all perspectives, and bringing the information back here so that we can adjust accordingly.

This is why I'm saying we have the learning mechanism for that. I think we're doing quite well as a learning organization. We are getting there, but the events are probably changing much faster than anybody anticipated, and in some instances the changes did occur within the same week, changing very rapidly from conventional confrontation back to asymmetric with a remotely controlled improvised explosive device. So it does vary. The opponent has a voice, and we have to adapt to it. I'm sure General Gauthier will be able to expand much further on how we are adapting and learning out of this. What is key is that we do adapt to it.

This is the context we're living in. We've seen it develop and we're getting prepared for it as well as as we can. We're using, for example, the Marines' type of analogy; they call it the three-block war. Within the same area, in one end you can be in full combat operations, at the other end you can be in stability operations, and in the city you're doing humanitarian assistance—rebuilding and so on. Our leadership has to be agile enough to be able to operate in this environment during the same day, and that's what we are learning. We see great changes, and our leadership is changing rapidly to this environment—and we must, because that's the environment we're facing right now and probably for a little while.

● (1655)

The Chair: Thank you. Is there anything else you'd like to add before we close this portion?

[*Translation*]

MGen Daniel Benjamin: No, I'm finished.

[*English*]

The Chair: We'll take a short recess while our guests leave us, and then we'll move on to committee business and the notice of motion from Mr. Bachand.

Thank you very much, gentlemen.

● (1655)

(Pause)

● (1655)

The Chair: We have two items of business to deal with. There's a notice of motion from Mr. Bachand, and then we'll go in camera to plan our future business.

The motion has been presented, the timelines have been met, and the wording is in front of you. I'd like to open it up by giving Mr. Bachand an opportunity to speak to his motion.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Claude Bachand: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Canadian troops have been in theatre in Afghanistan for several years now. I have to say that the media have done great work. Some even went over there and reported on operations. However, I have been hearing for several months that we don't have enough information about Afghanistan. I hear it around this table and in Parliament, and also from ordinary people in the riding of Saint-Jean. I'm sure it's the same thing everywhere else.

I think the time has come to tell the public of what is going on in Afghanistan, and the people in the best position to do that are officials with the Department of National Defence, because you know exactly what is going on.

As a member of the Defence Committee, I've always been very much in favour of the idea of our Committee being better informed about what exactly is taking place in the different theatres of operation.

It has always been a little frustrating for me to realize that at certain times, the Department could be hiding information. In the case of Afghanistan, the problem is not that it is hiding information, but simply that there isn't any. The Committee has every right to ask

to know what is going on on a weekly basis or, as I suggested to my colleagues, every two weeks.

What we need is for the Department to send us someone who is perfectly up-to-date on the operations being carried out in Afghanistan who can answer our questions on a variety of topics, including equipment, the fate of prisoners, how medical care is being provided, what happens when a soldier is wounded, as well as the legal aspect of this. Having visited a number of theatres, I know that there are now a lot of lawyers from the Judge Advocate General's office on site to deal with legal issues related to international law.

So, there are a lot of different areas where we really don't know much. I think the time has come for the Committee to get a much more accurate picture of what's going on in theatre.

I really have just repeated the comments that have been made in the last few months by a number of Committee members, on both sides of the table.

I hope my colleagues will see fit to support the motion we currently have before us.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

● (1700)

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Cannis.

Mr. John Cannis: Mr. Chair, I listened very carefully to what our colleague from the Bloc said. I have had the opportunity to discuss it with my colleagues on the Liberal side of the committee, and as much as we appreciate what he's saying—I think we all agree that information is something that Canadians and our constituents are asking for—we felt that weekly would be a little bit too much.

After a discussion we came to the conclusion, to an agreement to amend the motion by recommending a biweekly, as opposed to a weekly, briefing. That is something we are suggesting and recommending, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Would that be a motion you are tabling? Are you going to move that as an amendment?

Mr. John Cannis: We would move that amendment, sir.

The Chair: Okay.

I think we'll go over here.

Mr. Laurie Hawn: I have a couple of comments.

First of all, I agree that information is important. He said the public needs to know and that we need to be briefed. What we are briefed on, I would hope, would perhaps be somewhat different from what the public gets to know, at times. So there's a difference between what the public gets and what we get.

The other question I would ask us all to think about is what we are going to do with the information. Are we going to use it to try to make decisions for the CF? Are we going to use it just to inform ourselves? What are we going to actually do with the information that's going to be of any value to the mission, our common mission?

The frequency I would have some difficulty with. Having been on the other side, and I can tell you that the workload to get it right at that frequency, from the military's point of view, would not be insignificant.

Those are the only cautionary points I would put out there. We haven't discussed this, and I would leave it to somebody else to propose an amendment, but frankly, I think monthly, for me, personally, would be more than enough.

The Chair: We have a motion on the floor for an amendment to make it biweekly.

Mr. Laurie Hawn: I'm not putting it forward as an amendment. I'm just throwing it out there. Maybe someone down the table might want to—

The Chair: We'll go to Mr. Christopherson and then to Mr. Hiebert.

Mr. David Christopherson: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

In light of the importance of the matter, I called an emergency meeting of the NDP caucus on this committee, and we've concluded that we can support the amendment to make it every two weeks.

The Chair: Did you do that just now?

Mr. David Christopherson: Yes. We all got together. We're very efficient.

The Chair: You're an impressive member of the committee.

Mr. David Christopherson: It's tough to get them together, but we did.

An hon. member: Are you a caucus of one?

Mr. David Christopherson: We're all in agreement.

An hon. member: So there's quorum.

Mr. David Christopherson: Almost.

The Chair: Thank you very much for that.

We'll go over to Mr. Hiebert.

Mr. Russ Hiebert: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

First of all, I think we all recognize that the department has been doing an outstanding job of providing us with information. I refer to the witness we had just today, Major-General Benjamin. And previous generals and members of the department have been briefing us on a regular basis, so I don't think there's actually a shortage of information. We're also getting information from the media, as Mr. Bachand indicated. I would call to question whether it is in fact the case that such a shortage is actually present.

I also agree with my colleagues, both on my side and on the other side, that weekly briefings are perhaps a bit excessive. I don't think this committee should expect the department to be providing information of a confidential nature, in light of the fact that there are few, if any, members of this committee with the top secret clearance that would be required to receive that information. So we have to keep in mind the level of expectation we have of the department.

I'm also not convinced that the mission is changing so rapidly that we would have dramatically new information on a weekly basis or even on a biweekly basis. I think expecting a more regular briefing

would be in order, and I would support amending the motion to replace the word "weekly" with "regular".

I guess, Mr. Clerk, that would be considered another subamendment.

I also want to draw to the committee's attention the fact that although the department and the government are at the behest of parliamentarians, at the same time, I don't want to put an unnecessary burden on our military, in light of the degree to which they are currently being stretched by this mission, as we have heard repeatedly.

Those are the comments that I would like to bring to this committee's attention.

• (1705)

The Chair: So we now have a subamendment to change "weekly" to "regular". I'll get a briefing on how to handle this in a second, but go ahead.

Hon. Joe McGuire: On a point of information, I wonder if the clerk or the researcher could maybe fill us in on how it was handled during the first Iraqi war. How often, and to what extent was that information confidential, and how different was it from a public briefing?

The Chair: I'm not sure. Does anybody have that knowledge?

Mr. Wolf Koerner (Committee Researcher): If I can remember, I think it was about three times a week at one point. It was very regular. There was a briefing to the members of the foreign affairs and defence committees of the time. And then there was a daily press briefing where they simply repeated what they had already told parliamentarians.

Were the briefings very detailed? I would say no, they were the sorts of things one would pick up in the public domain.

Hon. Joe McGuire: How long did each briefing last?

Mr. Wolf Koerner: It was about an hour and a half, I think.

Hon. Joe McGuire: Were there some questions?

Mr. Wolf Koerner: They took questions, yes.

Hon. Joe McGuire: So it's the same information just using a public hearing.

Mr. Wolf Koerner: Pretty much, yes. When I went and then listened to the press conference the story didn't change that much. It was all unclassified.

If you're thinking of getting classified briefings, that's not going to happen. That's an important thing to remember here.

The Chair: Thanks for that comment. A little institutional history here.... Thanks, Wolf.

Mr. Laurie Hawn: I have just a little addition to the institutional history, having been there too. That was a war that was rapidly evolving. There were forces advancing. There was things changing almost every day. This isn't the same situation to the same extent that the Gulf War was at all.

Mr. John Cannis: Well, stuff is happening every day.

Mr. Laurie Hawn: Stuff is happening every day, but it's not evolving like the Gulf War was.

The Chair: A comment here....

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: I understand that there will be no classified briefings.

I believe the government made a commitment to Parliament that they would report to Parliament on a regular basis with respect to this war, and they have not made one report to Parliament, as a government, in the House or outside the House. I believe that to rectify that you need to hear from DND, at least, in this committee.

There are several privy councillors on this committee. I think one can trust the privy councillors to keep what's confidential and what is not confidential to share that with the public, because it's going to be shared regardless.

I'm not asking that we be given information that might leak out and jeopardize the safety and security of our troops, and that's the ultimate question. I believe we need to have a report to Parliament. And since we're not getting any reports to Parliament by government, this, in a way, becomes a report to Parliament, by DND, at least through the committee. Therefore I support the biweekly meetings where we'd be briefed. I think it's very, very important.

I'd much rather hear from DND about what is changing and what is not changing, about what's taking place on the ground, rather than hearing it in the newspapers three days later. At least I think it's important that we be given that degree of respect, in terms of the kinds of responsibilities all of us can carry and be responsible for.

So I fully support the amendment to make it biweekly in terms of the original motion.

• (1710)

The Chair: Thank you.

Do you have a comment?

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Sure. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I, too, would appreciate getting some briefings on this. I don't think we need to get one every week. Given the fact that we've been spending every committee meeting studying the mission in Afghanistan, I think as a committee we are as well briefed as anybody, from non-government organization officials, from other government officials, to Department of National Defence people.

We have been parading out the top brass here, and we have the Minister of National Defence and the Chief of the Defence Staff coming in the near future, if I remember correctly.

Given the fact that we are going to be producing a report on this sometime, and I don't think we've even clarified when that's going to be, I am just wondering if the intent of this is to add more information to our study. Or is this just a briefing? Is this briefing material going to be included in the study? And if so, doesn't that alter our ability as a committee to finalize a report and table it in the House of Commons, if we're going to keep on talking about this and receiving briefings? Is that the intent, to have these briefings included in the report? Or is this something extraneous to that?

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: As parliamentarians, we're not really bound by the terms of reference of a study that we might be engaged in.

We're parliamentarians. We are not limited by our own resolutions that we may have had.

What we're saying is that as parliamentarians, we are owed a certain degree of information from DND on behalf of Parliament. Since the government hasn't seen fit to go to Parliament to report on a regular basis, as they promised, this in fact becomes the next-best thing. I think it's fairly important.

The Chair: I would assume, and this is my opinion as chair, that this would be beyond the scope or the mandate of what we're studying and wouldn't be part of the report.

Go ahead, Russ.

Mr. Russ Hiebert: I just want to clarify that I don't think anybody at this point is suggesting that we not get reports from the department. I think that's fairly clear. I think we're simply trying to achieve a consensus as to what would be a reasonable frequency of those reports.

The Chair: I get that feeling too, that we're all in favour of being briefed. We're just dealing with some of the timing details here.

Mr. Cannis and then Mr. Bachand.

Mr. John Cannis: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I fully agree with the comment you just made, and I'd just like to put it on the table to all colleagues here.

This isn't necessarily studying the mission, but being informed of what is happening to our men and women, hearing from the people. I believe the information that is going to be presented to us will be information that is available to all, as Mr. Hawn pointed out. We will not be privy to sensitive classified information, but the media has a way of presenting a story, and I think we would like to hear it, if I may use it in a good way, from the horse's mouth directly, because we have an obligation to our constituents. It would certainly make us look silly as parliamentarians that we are not informed and we cannot respond to our constituents in a half-decent, intelligent way, as opposed to picking up the paper one day and reading something, and really they did not tell the whole story.

I believe, as an obligation to our constituents, and some members have bases in their ridings, it would only be appropriate that they hear it directly from the source and we put out the information as accurately as it is presented to us.

I don't want to compare that we're going to hear it from the media anyway, because I think it's two different scenarios altogether, Mr. Chairman.

• (1715)

The Chair: Mr. Bachand.

[Translation]

Mr. Claude Bachand: I trust the judgment of my colleagues around this table in terms of wanting to ask questions about confidential matters as part of a briefing.

We know what it's like to be told by a department that they cannot disclose this or that piece of information. In such a case, nothing is preventing parliamentarians from using the various means at their disposal, such as filing an access to information request or challenging the need to keep the information confidential. Personally, I have faith in our Committee colleagues' insight and intelligence.

As regards the frequency of these briefings, I have heard people argue on a number of occasions that the poor Department of National Defence is already very busy, particularly with the submarine file. We were told that the French translation would be much too costly, and that it was terrible for people in the Department, and that they didn't have the time. I simply don't accept those excuses. The Committee has certain rights and it can exercise those rights.

No one is going to tell me that the Minister of Defence is not briefed on a daily basis on what is going on in Afghanistan. I certainly hope he is. I would like him to have access to more information, because he probably has a much higher security clearance than we do, meaning that he is entitled to access it. In fact, I hope he has the highest possible clearance. That is probably also the case for the Parliamentary Secretary.

But it is up to the Committee to determine how relevant the Department's arguments are and whether it believes that confidentiality is justified.

I don't think it is too much for the Defence Committee to request a briefing every two weeks on what is going on in Afghanistan, unless we are told that our role is to do nothing more than hear from a whole series of witnesses, prepare a brief report, and then move on to something else.

At the present time, Afghanistan is the fundamental problem in terms of our international policy. This Committee has every right to make such demands. We will table a report one day. In fact, I think we'll be talking about that shortly. Mention was made of a Steering Committee meeting. I simply want to remind you that the motion, as currently worded, provides for the Committee to continue to be briefed every two weeks, until further notice. When the Committee feels it has had enough, or when the conflict is over, it could put an end to these briefings. They could continue even after the report has

been tabled, but it would be up to the Committee to make that decision.

Mr. Chairman, in my opinion, the wording of this motion is perfectly appropriate and the amendment provides an interesting contribution.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll close off. The question has been called.

I understand that the way to do this is to deal with the subamendment proposed by Mr. Hiebert first, that we substitute the word "regularly" for "biweekly", which we have not voted on yet.

So the motion is to use the word "regularly": "That the Department of National Defence be requested to report regularly to the House of Commons Standing Committee...."

• (1720)

Mr. John Cannis: And then, if I could ask the clerk, we go back to the....

The Chair: We go back to the original amendment.

All those in favour of "regularly"?

(Subamendment negatived)

The Chair: We will move on to the amendment. The amendment would replace the word "weekly" with "biweekly": "That the Department of National Defence be requested to report biweekly to the House of Commons Standing Committee...."

(Amendment agreed to)

The Chair: Now we have to vote on the amended motion. On the amended motion, it states:

That the Department of National Defence be requested to report biweekly to the House of Commons Standing Committee on National Defence on the status and progress of Canada's involvement in Afghanistan until further notice.

(Motion as amended agreed to)

The Chair: The meeting is suspended.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*].

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