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Chair

Mr. Rick Casson

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● (1540)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Rick Casson (Lethbridge, CPC)): We have a rather full agenda today, and we have some high-quality witnesses to appear before us. We want to give them the appropriate amount of time.

Later today we're continuing our study on the health of the forces, but we want to start with what has become known as our regular Afghanistan update. As regular or irregular as it is, it's always welcome.

General Atkinson, director general of operations, Strategic Joint Staff, you've been here before and you know the routine. The floor is yours for the first period of time, and then we'll do a quick round of questions, one from each party, and we'll move on.

Go ahead, sir.

Brigadier-General P. Atkinson (Director General Operations, Strategic Joint Staff , Department of National Defence): Thank you very much. I know that those high-quality witnesses you were talking about are sitting in the row behind me. I'm very glad you've called them here.

I will step right in. Over the past two months, there have been a number of operations conducted with ISAF forces, the Afghan National Army, and the Afghan National Police, each playing an important role. These operations were very successful in improving the mobility of the security forces and in contributing to the level of stability in our area of responsibility, consequently extending the reach of the Afghan government.

Joint Task Force Afghanistan has also completed a number of development projects, which I will also discuss briefly. One caution that I would add to these introductory remarks is the fact that although we are achieving success, Afghans still need our support and our presence, because they have not yet achieved the required level of self-sustainment.

Over the past two months, insurgents have continued to deploy IEDs, suicide bombers, and indirect fire—rockets and mortars—against coalition forces. Those tactics represent the lowest level of combat in the counter-insurgency operations. The insurgents have continued to target civilians, children, schools, and infrastructure throughout Kandahar province. However, they have achieved only limited success to date. They attempt to exploit any opportunity to discredit the Government of Afghanistan and ISAF, and will continue to attempt to intimidate the local population through propaganda, execution of those they identify as traitors, and attacking police stations and government district centres. The use of these tactics is a reaction to the successful operations by pro-government forces in recent months.

Here are a few examples of the terror campaign against the Afghan people over the last months.

A suicide bombing at an outdoor dog-fighting competition killed 80 people, and wounded approximately 125 local nationals, on February 17. That attack was the deadliest terror attack in Afghanistan since the fall of the Taliban in 2001. Unfortunately, that was a bad wake-up call.

The insurgents claimed responsibility for eight attacks against cellular towers across Kandahar province. They wish to decrease or cut that communication link between ISAF and the local nationals. That is because the local nationals have increasingly been reporting on their activities to ISAF.

The insurgents attempted to burn down the Mia Abdul Hakim high school, southwest of Kandahar City. That institution was attended by more than 1,250 students, including 179 girls. This incident was strongly condemned by the local media, who nicknamed the insurgents “the enemies of education”. What is positive from that event is that two days after it occurred, the people from the community, including the principal, the teachers, and the school watchman, reported that 80% of the students had returned to the school despite the damage.

Also, during my last appearance, I was asked about the misinformation campaigns conducted by the insurgents. Following an operation by coalition forces where a number of insurgents were killed, the insurgents attempted to exploit this incident by reporting to local and international media that ISAF was responsible for the bombing and killing of 40 to 60 civilians during a fair and a sports event. Very quickly the story was denounced locally and by ISAF. ISAF is undertaking efforts to release classified imagery to counter that misinformation program.

I want to slip into the security pillar and talk about the Afghan national security forces. The Afghan National Army and the Afghan National Police are integrally linked to the security of the key districts of Kandahar province. The joint provincial coordination centre enables security forces to synchronize, coordinate, and monitor provincial Afghan national security forces.

The Afghan National Army's development into a force capable of planning, executing, and sustaining operations with some coalition support is progressing very well. The continuing improvements in their ability to plan and to undertake operations are evidence of the ANA's steady and positive growth. Afghan National Army combat units continue to improve, with over half being considered capable of performing counter-insurgency operations with external support.

Collective combat skills also continue to improve. The ANA currently has a leadership role in 25% of military operations across Afghanistan. However, work still remains to be done in training of headquarters and support units in order for the ANA to eventually achieve a truly independent capability.

ISAF requires 56 operational mentor liaison teams. Currently only 34 of those are filled, and Canada provides six of those 34 OMLTs.

The focused district development assists in the development of a professional Afghan National Police. It provides vetted, Afghan, uniform police leaders, therefore helping to eliminate local corruption. Building a visible national police force is a long-term project, and while tremendous progress has been made, there still is a long way for them to go with their police force.

The U.S. Marines intend to dedicate approximately 1,000 soldiers towards Afghan national security force capacity-building, while the balance, the other 2,200 soldiers, will be conducting stability operations throughout Regional Command South. This surge is expected to be in place for seven months. ISAF announced that they started combat operations today.

[*Translation*]

The Afghan National Army was created on 1 December 2002 when President Hamid Karzai issued a decree announcing the creation of an all-volunteer Afghan National Army inclusive of social and ethnic origin.

Today, the Afghan National Army stands at around 50,000; every two weeks, the Kabul Military Training Centre graduates 1,100 more soldiers. The Afghan National Army includes five ground maneuver corps and one air corps.

The five ANA corps serve as regional commands which allow the Afghan National Army to put a permanent ANA presence in every region of Afghanistan. The Afghan National Air Corps is an important and growing element of the ANA. Equipped with former Soviet Union aircraft, the ANAC is being trained to perform a wide range of missions that include presidential airlift, medical and casualty evacuation, battlefield mobility, reconnaissance airlift, airborne command and control as well as light air attack.

The Afghan National Army demonstrates clearly to the Afghan people and to the international community that the Afghan national government authority extends throughout the nation. For such a young Army, the ANA is maturing rapidly. Its soldiers are extremely dedicated and they benefit from the centuries-old warrior tradition of Afghanistan. They take pride in their accomplishments against the enemies of their people and in being the force of security and stability that will enable a new and democratic Afghanistan to evolve.

The multi-ethnic, highly-skilled and professional Afghan National Army is a national institution respected by the Afghan people and viewed by them as a strong symbol of national unity.

● (1545)

[*English*]

Turning now specifically to the police, developing a capable ANP, or Afghan National Police, is critical to ensuring security, both within Afghanistan and at its borders. Currently the ANP totals 76,410 officers out of the authorized 82,000. The Ministry of Interior expects to reach that goal of 82,000 by December of this year. In addition to the regular police force, the ANP includes counter-terrorism and counter-narcotics forces, customs, counter-IED, and border police, as well as the auxiliary police forces acting in complement to the existing security apparatus.

Entry-level training for the ANP is conducted at the central training centre in Kabul, and also at one of seven regional training centres, in Kandahar, Herat, Gardez, Mazar-e sharif, Kunduz, Jalalabad, and Bamyan. Trainees attend an eight-week program of instruction in the following areas: general police duties, weapons proficiency, first aid, human rights training, community policing, basic border police training, and Afghan law and culture. They conduct specialized training in bomb disposal, fingerprinting, traffic management, unarmed combat, crime scene investigation, advanced firearms, and civil order riot control skills—all the things that we take for granted here in our own country.

ANP operations with the Afghan National Army are continuing to mature, with coordination, infrastructure and training improving every day. The Ministry of Interior has initiated a number of reforms aimed at increasing the professionalism of the Afghan National Police.

Key to their development process is the United States Combined Security Transition Command, and its focused district development program. This program is on top of that eight weeks of basic training that I've already described, and consists of another eight weeks of training. The local police are taken out of the cycle, out of the area; that is, they are taken back. This started last December, when they started taking police out of the regions and giving them this higher level training. Then they embed them back into their regions. This first cycle is just being completed, and we're going to see our first results from the policemen in Kandahar who have just done this. We anticipate that this effort will make some gains.

I want to talk specifically about benchmarks for the ANA and the ANP.

[*Translation*]

The Afghan National Army development into a force capable of planning, executing and sustaining operations with some coalition support is progressing very well.

Their continued improvements in the ability to plan operations, and their ability to undertake operations are evidence of Afghan National Army steady and positive growth. Afghan National Army combat units continue to improve with over half being considered capable of performing counter-insurgency operations with external support.

Collective combat skills also continue to improve. The Afghan National Army currently has a leadership role in approximately 25% of military operations in Afghanistan. However, work still remains to be done in the training of headquarters and support units in order for the Afghan National Army eventually to achieve a truly independent capability.

● (1550)

[*English*]

Since my last appearance on February 5, we now have an additional operational mentor liaison team working with the combat support *kandak*. In fact, Canada has had a direct impact on the training, development, and growth of the ANA, which is now at 50,000, as I mentioned earlier. At any one time, we have 150 soldiers training and mentoring 2,500 Afghan soldiers with our OMLT teams in Kandahar province.

Another key realization was achieved in February 2008, when the Afghan National Army, in cooperation with the Afghan National Police, took over responsibility for security in the Zhari district, with ISAF forces in support. The Afghan national security forces have now taken responsibility in Zhari, a huge step for them.

Also at our previous appearance, I explained the progress achieved by the ANP, which are being mentored by our police mentoring and liaison teams. Today we have 60 soldiers and military police embedded with the Afghan police. These embedded soldiers live and work with them 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. The Afghan National Police are becoming a more effective force, able to provide a basic—a basic—level of security in key district centres.

In March, an Afghan-led operation was conducted by the Afghan National Army, where they demonstrated their ability to conduct operations at the battalion level, in conjunction with the Afghan police. The operation involved searching an area owned by the insurgents, and it produced a significant cache of ammunition and weapons. The operation has increased the level of security in the immediate area of a police substation, and has improved the influence of the Government of Afghanistan in that region.

Now, shifting to development, Joint Task Force Afghanistan's support of reconstruction and development stands as one of our key supporting military tasks. I have a couple of good examples. First, when you look at top left slide, you will see that it is of Kandahar City. As I've mentioned before, Kandahar City is growing and is becoming a centre of social and economic activity for southern Afghanistan. But to keep the economy moving, transportation is a primary consideration for city planners, particularly pedestrian traffic. For years, pedestrians mingled freely between storefront properties and major throughways, slowing traffic, causing accidents, restricting freedom of movement and retarding economic activity. Working with the City of Kandahar's chief engineer, our PRT mentored a local engineering firm in the delivery of this major fencing project. Afghans, with Canadian assistance, identified the key areas requiring renovation. Members of our specialist engineering team and the city developed a proposal to fence off four key downtown areas to restrict pedestrians from spilling onto the street.

Now, on the top right of the slide, you will see the result: the traffic is flowing smoothly, ISAF vehicles can move more freely throughout the city, economic activity is picking up. Most importantly, fewer accidents with serious injuries are occurring as a result.

On the bottom left slide is the largest school in Spin Boldak, a town on the border with Pakistan. The Malik Kabir school was attacked by the insurgents last summer. The insurgents' aim was to discourage the population from sending their children to school. They detonated a landmine at the base of the school wall, damaging the foundation and the roofs of the classrooms. The place was unfit to be used after the attack. At the behest of the local population, the KPRT and local engineers swung into action. After extensive repairs, the school is operational once again. The locals have endorsed the repairs, and are reported to have taken a more active role in their children's education by keeping an eye on insurgent activity—reporting on it—and posting guards to help provide security at night. At the bottom right is the image of that renovated school, which has 300 students, both male and female.

I'll turn now to the next slide.

[*Translation*]

Located in the center of Kandahar City, the village of Hazrat Ji Baba has been without a proper pedestrian bridge for several years. Previously, a small wooden structure provided a valuable connecting service to an area populated with small business. Over the years, the bridge slowly disintegrated, leaving nothing but the rotten foundations amidst a flowing morass of stinking debris and raw sewage. Undeterred, local villagers continued to cross the liquid ditch. Now that the new bridge is complete, it is far easier for villagers to access local markets.

● (1555)

[*English*]

That's a small project, big impact.

Route Foster is one that you would have caught on the news last week. On April 7, the governor of Kandahar province joined with General Laroche to officially open a new road-paving project that employs more than 400 local Afghans. This ambitious project is a major step forward for the people of the troubled Panjwai district west of Kandahar City. This project was undertaken to improve security, but has major impacts on development, economy, and governance. Hundreds of local workers, many who braved Taliban threats to work on the road, were on hand for the ceremony, as were local leaders and village elders. General Laroche said paving the road will make it harder, although not impossible, for insurgents to plant improvised explosive devices.

The locals, when we had a team over visiting last week, made the point that they've been leaning on the Taliban when they see them, saying, “Leave our road alone. We need this road for the betterance of our lives.” By winning the hearts and minds of those people and by having their level of engagement in a project this major, this is the type of success on the ground that really makes the difference.

Now turning to governance, the return of the local population in Zhari and Panjwai, active shuras, the successful medical civil action patrols, and the fact that more than 400 local employees have been hired to work on the route are indicative of our progress. Since the fall of the Taliban government, Kandahar City celebrated its first ever Kandahar spring festival. This CIDA-sponsored program attracted more than 3,200 individuals to activities that took place between March 1 and March 4 last month. Officials of the government of Afghanistan were directly involved in the organizational process.

Skills Generation is a non-profit, non-governmental organization whose aim is to improve educational opportunities for children in developing countries. Skills Generation is the first organization to have one of its projects approved under the new CIDA web-based system called "challenge facility", which matches private donations with CIDA funding to Canadian non-governmental organizations working in Afghanistan. An estimated 8,500 girls and boys in 17 elementary schools in Dand, Daman, Arghandab, and Spin Boldak districts will benefit directly from this project.

March 20 marked the birth of the Prophet Muhammad. It occurred without any incident, despite numerous threats by the Taliban that they would do so in the days leading up to the event. Afghan national security forces assumed primary security, while coalition forces were prepared in a quick-reaction mode. We did not have to do anything.

Unfortunately, our successes in Afghanistan over the last two months have come with the price of four Canadian soldiers killed in action. We will remember those courageous soldiers, and we send our deepest regrets to their families and their friends and their soldiers who are still there serving.

I want to close off with just two more good-news stories. Task Force Kandahar "Role 3" medical unit made a significant impact during what was an unfortunate incident—the mass casualty following that suicide bombing at the dog fight. It was reported that during this incident there was a record-breaking turnaround for both triage treatment and evacuation, the quickest that had ever been seen in the region.

Thanks to the involvement of our Regional Command South medical evacuation assets—read helicopters and medics—and the multinational Role 3 efforts, they moved right in on the ground into the city and took control of this, because this was a major, major event. Patients were evacuated directly to the Mirwais hospital in Kandahar City and the new Afghan National Army medical clinic in Camp Hero, where all the training is going on for the ANA, with the overflow being directed to the Kandahar airfield. The triage was well organized and several life-saving decisions were made. The population of Kandahar City also responded quickly and massively to a request for blood donors at the Mirwais hospital, and the long lineup of donors included members of the provincial council.

Joint Task Force Afghanistan was served with a huge morale booster last month when Team Canada arrived on the ground, led by the Chief of the Defence Staff, bringing the Stanley Cup, the Jonas Tomalty band, and the band Blue Rodeo. They played a bunch of hockey; the soldiers got to interact and meet with them; and in the midst of all the things they were doing, a small, little bright light from Canada shone on Kandahar for the days they were there. There was an impact on the soldiers, but there was a huge impact back on the people who actually came over on the trip—the hockey players, the bands, and all the people who came.

● (1600)

The Canadian Forces this last month welcomed the arrival of Elissa Goldberg, the representative of Canada in Kandahar; I always think that "ROCK" makes a nice little acronym there. She represents Canada at the provincial level, as the senior civilian representative of our government, working under the leadership of our ambassador in Kabul, Ambassador Lalani, and supports the implementation of Canada's strategic objectives in Kandahar province. She also serves as the principal interlocutor with the provincial government officials and institutes in Kandahar on governance and development-related matters.

Having her there now is a huge step in moving forward our whole-of-government agenda. There is a Foreign Affairs face working with Governor Asadullah Khalid, and this is what we have needed to help move that agenda forward. So it's a very important step.

In closing, I want to draw your attention to the slide. You'll see the link on the bottom. There was a NATO article that was published in Bucharest this past week and it summarized progress in Afghanistan. I have a single copy here, but that link will allow you to go to it. It is an outstanding 24-page article. It has all kinds of metrics. It features a lot about what is happening in Kandahar and what Canadians are doing, which just shows that we are having an effect.

I know you have a busy agenda. I'll close off there and I'll take any questions you have, sir.

The Chair: Thank you, sir.

We'll go to a quick round, if we can. As you know, we have a busy schedule.

Who will start? Let's try to keep it to four to five minutes, please.

Mr. Wilfert.

Hon. Bryon Wilfert (Richmond Hill, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, General Atkinson, for your briefing. I want to first of all concur with your comments with regard to the work that our forces are doing there. Having been there, although so briefly in April 2006, with the then Minister of Foreign Affairs, I can certainly appreciate the work that's being done.

The issue I talked to our forces there about, which continued when I was at Foreign Affairs, was the issue of the Afghan National Police. My understanding has been that the army is much further ahead than the police. You talk about how critical or crucial they are to security and that at the moment they can provide at least basic security needs, but we really need to enhance that role.

I'd like to know a little more about that eight-week additional program you were talking about. How will that be assessed in terms of its effectiveness? What kind of rollout do they anticipate afterwards, given the fact that, in order to have the kind of development projects that we would like to see there—obviously through the Afghan government—we can secure it?

BGen P. Atkinson: No problem. I'll back up a little bit, just to underscore what you were saying.

The Afghan National Army basically started two years ahead of the Afghan National Police. That's why they are at the level they are today. For a country to achieve a level of stability and for the people to have confidence in their government and in their service and everything else, they do not want to see a soldier on the street, they want to see a policeman.

So the fact that they have been able to recruit 76,000-plus police officers so far is a measure of effectiveness in its own right, that they've gotten there. But you can't build a police force overnight. That is based on eight weeks of basic training and then putting them in on the ground into the communities, into the districts, into the police substations where we're working, and they're working hand in glove with the Afghan National Army. That is why we have put our police mentoring liaison team—six of them—and embedded those in with the police that are working in our key districts.

That next level of training, the American-led organization in Kabul, CSTC Alpha, has the mandate to provide that next level of professional training. What they've done is this. They've come in and they've taken, I believe, about 80 policemen out of our district and they've put some temporary police in place while they were there, taken them back to Kabul, and provided eight weeks of further professional training and policing.

The first cycle started in December. The people who went from Kandahar went about two months ago and they are expected to start coming back into our area within the next week or so. The proof will be in the pudding, on the ground, when we see the increased level of professionalism and how they act on the ground: I call it trust, but verify. That's why we work with them, with our police on this mentoring liaison team—which is soldiers and military police working in the checkpoints—so we can see they are making that necessary progress.

It will take time. I would love for us to be able to have 80 police on the training teams, but it is moving ahead and we are very encouraged by the operations that are taking place between the Afghan National Army and the Afghan National Police together. The one operation I talked about, led by the Afghan National Army, supported by the police, had an impact.

They're not there yet. It's a work-in-progress. It took a long time for us to build the RCMP and the OPP and the other police forces we have in our nation. They're a nation in a hurry. They want to get there and we just need to continue to help them, but, sir, it's going to take time, as you pointed out.

● (1605)

The Chair: You have a minute.

Hon. Joe McGuire (Egmont, Lib.): Okay.

We haven't had a pitched battle now for over a year. Our casualties have been from the IEDs.

What progress are we making in identifying the IEDs before they actually go off? What kind of expertise are we developing there? What statistical progress have we made of the ones that went off versus the ones we identified?

We don't control that much territory, and the Taliban have free rein, basically, all over the place, in the evenings or at night. We have to be very good at this. So how good are we?

The Chair: Make it a short response, if you can.

BGen P. Atkinson: This is a very complex question. I'll be able to answer part of it, and I'll tell you why I won't answer a certain piece of it specifically.

IEDs are the lowest common denominator the Afghans have available to them. For us to be effective and to establish confidence for the Afghans, we need to be throughout the districts and interfacing with the people everywhere, which is why we and the Afghan national security forces have to move about, both individually and together.

Obviously we have defensive efforts. I talked about the EROC system, our mine clearance system, our tanks and mine rollers, and things that we have. Those are physical measures we take.

Obviously we have an awful lot of intelligence-led operations, which we take. We go after what I call “before the boom”—that is, the fellows who design those things, the fellows who finance those things, and then obviously we go after the people who place those things.

We have a full-court press. Without going into detail, it is something we do each and every day. The reason I don't want to talk about the details of our success in different things is that would give direct feedback to the fellows on the other side about their level of success or not.

We are having a tremendous amount of success, but it is at a cost. As you've pointed out, our greatest number of casualties have been because of the IED. It's a terrible weapon. It's indiscriminate—against not just our soldiers but also the local nationals, the people, the children, the contractors. The IED is indiscriminate, and it is causing the Taliban to lose whatever nascent support they had with the local population. The people are getting tired. They are turning them in. They are telling us, “Don't go down that road. They put an IED in there last night. That guy over in the field is not one of us.”

So we are starting to have that level of confidence with them that allows us to fight that.

The Chair: Thank you, sir.

Mr. Bachand.

[*Translation*]

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

First of all, I would like to have some details about the 3,200 American soldiers. The Defence Secretary, Robert Gates, made a commitment to send 3,200 soldiers in southern Afghanistan. How long will they be there? Will they be there for 7 months?

BGen P. Atkinson: Yes. They will be there from April to November but 2,200 soldiers will work and fight in the South. The other 1,000 will work in the other districts of Afghanistan with CSTC-A to train the Afghan National Police, the ANP. That would be the second part. One thousand american soldiers will train the ANP and 2,200 will work with us at Regional Command South. Operations are starting today.

Mr. Claude Bachand: Are the 2,200 soldiers doing combat operations under Canadian command?

● (1610)

BGen P. Atkinson: Yes, at this time, Regional Command South is led by General Marc Lessard. He is the regional CO and he is the one giving orders to all the forces working and operating in the southern region.

Mr. Claude Bachand: What will happen in November with those additional 1,000 US soldiers? Is the US government going to say that 1,200 have to leave and the other 1,000 have to stay?

BGen P. Atkinson: It is linked to the announcement from the French government. President Sarkozy has decided to send 700 soldiers in the eastern part of Afghanistan, which will free 1,000 who will be able to go to Kandahar with our brigades. The operational details are being developed by the Americans and the other members of the coalition.

Mr. Claude Bachand: When those details are ready, will you let us know and explain how this will work?

BGen P. Atkinson: Absolutely.

Mr. Claude Bachand: Has the issue of the Afghan policemen's pay been resolved? They were not being paid enough and several were attracted by corruption or were tempted to cooperate with the Taliban.

BGen P. Atkinson: I believe the issue has been partly resolved but I will give you a more definite answer another time.

Mr. Claude Bachand: Next time, could you give us some details about the salary scale of policemen for us to see if progress has been made?

You have referred to the Foster Route but I seem to have read recently that workers have been attacked there. Is that the road where 35 workers would have been killed by the Taliban?

BGen P. Atkinson: That happened in another section of road. I cannot tell you exactly where but Foster Route is one of the most important roads for our forces in the Kandahar District. Each week, there are incidents such as the one you just mentioned.

Mr. Claude Bachand: Those 35 road workers were not killed on Foster Route?

Bgén P. Atkinson: No.

Mr. Claude Bachand: You know where it happened but you cannot tell me?

BGen P. Atkinson: Exactly.

Mr. Claude Bachand: In your presentations, I did not hear any reference to the SAT, the Strategic Advisory Team, which I believe is very important because it advises President Karzai. Can you give us some information about the work of that team? How many soldiers are there on the team? Is it really beneficial for Afghanistan and for the Canadian forces?

BGen P. Atkinson: The SAT is very positive for our forces in Afghanistan.

[*English*]

Excuse me, I will answer in English. This is a very important question, and I want to make sure I give you the exact right words.

Our strategic advisory team is there to help and aid the Government of Afghanistan. President Karzai has said a number of times how that team of both military and civilian.... It is mostly military, but there are also civilian members. We are currently working with the Department of Foreign Affairs to expand the civilian members on that team.

Over the next rotation, this summer, we hope that we will have a larger number of members from CIDA, Foreign Affairs, and other departments, who will work with us as we continue to advance this agenda with the Government of Afghanistan. They are strategic-level planners. They are there to assist and enable those key Afghan ministries.

We get feedback from the head of mission. Last week, when we had a visit from defence stakeholders to the theatre, Ambassador Lalani talked about the positive effect they were having and that the Afghans want us to continue to contribute and provide them with that level of assistance.

It is very important, and one that absolutely must continue.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bachand. That was a very efficient use of your time.

Ms. Black.

● (1615)

Ms. Dawn Black (New Westminster—Coquitlam, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Welcome, General Atkinson, again.

I also want to follow up on the issue of the Afghan National Police. I look forward to receiving the breakdown that you talked to Mr. Bachand about.

I have a lot of concern with an eight-week training program. I have two sons who are police officers, and I know what they go through in Canada before they are even allowed on the streets. It is nine months, and then they are mentored after that. We are trying to build something from the bottom, but when we know about the level of corruption that has taken place there and that still goes on, it's very worrying.

I'd like to see a breakdown of how many are ANAP, how many are regular police, and how many are in the various branches that you laid out in your report.

BGen P. Atkinson: Okay.

Ms. Dawn Black: I'd also like to know whether there are any policewomen being trained. I think there might be one or two, but I'd like to know—

BGen P. Atkinson: The answer's yes.

Ms. Dawn Black: I know it's a very small proportion. I'd like to know the number of them and how they're doing out in the field. That's for the next time you visit us, I guess.

The other thing I wanted to ask you about was an article that was printed in *The Independent* last week. It's a British newspaper. Are you aware of the article?

BGen P. Atkinson: I might be after you tell me what it is.

Ms. Dawn Black: It may have come to your attention in that they're talking about warlords using heroin cash to buy surface-to-air missiles. It was a concern for the British.

I'm wondering what you might know about these concerns. If they were to be able to achieve surface-to-air missiles, it seems to me that the issue of getting helicopters would be less of an advantage to us if the insurgents were able to use that kind of technology. What kind of technology would we use, or would be available to Canadians, if they did get them?

BGen P. Atkinson: Obviously any time insurgents or anybody that we're working against would have surface-to-air missiles, that would be of concern to us. That threat has always been in Afghanistan. There have been helicopters and other aircraft that have been engaged—

Ms. Dawn Black: With surface-to-air missiles?

BGen P. Atkinson: I said were engaged; there have been reportedly incidents of surface-to-air missiles used in the past. But the threat is there. We have a number of things, from our operating procedures to defensive suites on board aircraft to intelligence-led operations. If we knew about somebody who had that kind of capability, I think you could make a safe assumption that this is something we would endeavour to seek out and destroy.

Ms. Dawn Black: Have you heard about these concerns that the British have?

BGen P. Atkinson: I know about the article you mentioned. It is a concern for ISAF, given our reliance upon air mobility in the theatre. So it is a real concern, one that ISAF takes seriously and one that they have the ability to deal with.

Ms. Dawn Black: I think you mentioned in your opening comments that combat operations started today with the 2,200 marines that you say are in Regional Command South. Was that in the Kandahar region? Were they operating with the Canadians?

BGen P. Atkinson: I'm not at liberty to say exactly where they're operating, but it is within the area under General Lessard's command. RC South comprises us, the Dutch, the Americans, and the Brits. They will be operating throughout the whole of RC South over the next number of months, until November.

Just having that many more soldiers come into an area where we have been lacking allows Commander ISAF, and Commander RC South in particular, to have an immediate effect of boots on the ground, enabling that security that we and the Afghans want so bad. We will see the benefit of that investment.

● (1620)

Ms. Dawn Black: Are you expecting a spring offensive? What measures are you taking to counter it, aside from these additional marine reinforcements?

BGen P. Atkinson: "Spring offensive" is a term that comes up every year. It's spring, they come out of the mountains, and the fighting season picks back up. Right now there's a bit of an opium harvest going on. We know that's going to finish in a couple of weeks. We anticipate that the pace of things within the country will probably pick up again.

Commander ISAF has an operational plan on the ground, down through each of his districts, including RC South and into Kandahar. I know you don't want me to talk about the details.

Ms. Dawn Black: No, I don't.

BGen P. Atkinson: They are intending to fully step out and take advantage of those additional forces to have the effect on the insurgency that we want to achieve.

The Chair: Mr. Hawn.

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

Thank you, General, for being here again. I have a number of quick questions.

If the ANSF is operating independently in Zhari, are we babysitting them, directly or indirectly?

BGen P. Atkinson: They have taken responsibility for Zhari. We have enablers that they do not have—artillery, engineers, and other pieces. But it is their responsibility. Our OMLTs are there. All those *kandaks* that are operating, those OMLTs, are in place, but it is their command and control that is being exercised. They are making the decisions.

Obviously it was a very positive step for them to take over responsibility for that sector. We want to see that grow to the left and to the right in the coming days.

Mr. Laurie Hawn: Is there more than one *kandak* operating together, or is it still a single *kandak*?

BGen P. Atkinson: In the Zhari they have the ability to move their *kandaks* around. As you know, we basically have a brigade of 2,500, which is three full *kandaks* and the combat service support and operational support.

Mr. Laurie Hawn: So they have been operating together.

BGen P. Atkinson: Yes.

Mr. Laurie Hawn: Okay.

You may or may not be able to tell us this, but there's always the question of territory and how much we control and how much the Taliban controls. Can you give us an estimate of how much territory we control in Kandahar, either directly ourselves or through the ANA or ANP, with some confidence? That would be as a percentage...or a WAG.

BGen P. Atkinson: Let me think about that for a second.

Rather than give you an off-the-top answer, I know that we operate where 90% of the Afghans live, in Kandahar province. I'd rather give you a more fulsome answer, so I'll take that on notice and I'll provide that.

Mr. Laurie Hawn: I'd like to ask you a question to clarify the concept of command and who commands whom over there. People keep asking if these people are under Canadian command and so on. Could you clarify? RC South is currently commanded by a Canadian, therefore all forces in RC South are under the command of a Canadian.

BGen P. Atkinson: That's true.

BGen P. Atkinson: General Marc Lessard is a NATO commander.

Mr. Laurie Hawn: But they're not under Canadian command, they're under NATO command, and that commander could be British, American, or Dutch.

Mr. Laurie Hawn: Exactly.

BGen P. Atkinson: He responds to General Dan McNeill, the commander of ISAF, who takes his instructions from Brunssum, which is NATO headquarters in Holland.

Mr. Laurie Hawn: So it's not Canadian command, it's NATO command.

BGen P. Atkinson: He happens to be a Canadian. As you know, it is a rotated command. It was a Brit before that, and it was Dutch before that. The first Canadian commander of RC South was General David Fraser.

Mr. Laurie Hawn: Obviously the French have stepped up with a commitment to allow American forces to come into Kandahar. Can you talk just a little bit about working with the U.S. forces, and not just about the philosophical things we share but about some of the equipment they would bring that will benefit the operation?

BGen P. Atkinson: Marines are kind of like a self-contained organization when they show up. They bring all their toys with them—guns, armoured vehicles, helicopters, UAVs, everything. So when they come to a place to work, they really are a self-contained, all-encompassing piece.

We work so well with the Americans. Our doctrine is very similar. They have officers who train in our war college in Toronto, and we have officers who train in their war colleges in the U.S. Our ability to conduct, plan, and execute operations together goes back to our history of working together as partners but also to working within NATO. So whether working with them, with the Brits, with the Dutch, with the Germans, or others inside ISAF, we have a shared history of working together over the last number of years. And our time working together in Afghanistan has just further cemented that.

Working with them is easy because we think so alike in the way we operate on the ground, in the way we plan, and in the way we execute. And it's been very helpful to have them show up with the amount of capability they've had. It is a real enabler.

● (1625)

The Chair: That's about it, sir. I hate to do that, but we have more work to do.

Thank you, General, once again, for your update. We look forward to the next time. You've had some questions that you've indicated you will supply some answers to.

BGen P. Atkinson: I will.

The Chair: We will suspend while we change to our next panel.

● (1625)

(Pause)

● (1625)

The Chair: Everybody is in their places. We'll get started. Time is of the essence, as usual.

We'd like to welcome today Colonel Milner, Commander 2nd Canadian Mechanized Brigade Group; Lieutenant-Colonel Roger Barrett, Commanding Officer Third Battalion, Royal Canadian Regiment; Lieutenant-Colonel Stephen M. Cadden, Commanding Officer Royal Canadian Dragoons; and Lieutenant-Colonel Craig Dalton, Commanding Officer 2nd Regiment, Royal Canadian Horse Artillery.

I want to welcome you all. We've been looking forward to this panel. I apologize for being tight on time here today.

I understand, Colonel Milner, you have an opening statement. Then we can get right into the questions. The floor is yours.

Colonel Dean J. Milner (Commander, 2nd Canadian Mechanized Brigade Group, Department of National Defence): Mr. Chair, members of the committee, first of all I would like to thank you for the opportunity to address you here today.

As you're aware, I command the 2 Brigade. I and my three commanding officers, who are here with me today, are just down the road about an hour and a half. We have a lot of experience with respect to training soldiers and preparing them for missions over in Afghanistan, and we have a whole bunch of other experience from other missions that we've been a part of since we joined the Canadian Forces.

Right off the bat, I'd just like to emphasize the fact that we've been extremely busy in 2 Brigade. We've recently redeployed a couple of rotations from Afghanistan, and we're in the process of preparing another task force that will depart in September for Afghanistan. My brigade has sustained a number of casualties, both killed and wounded in Afghanistan, so we have a fair bit of experience with respect to taking care of our wounded soldiers.

Colonel Roger Barrett is the commander of the next task force that's going over to Afghanistan. He's about midway through his training, preparing his soldiers to go over to Afghanistan.

Colonel Craig Dalton is responsible for the guns. He's just had two artillery batteries that have recently redeployed from Afghanistan, and he has a battery that's getting ready to deploy over to Afghanistan. So he's heavily engaged in the deployment and redeployment of troops.

Lieutenant-Colonel Steve Cadden, who commands the Dragoons, has also been extremely busy. He's had a number of reconnaissance, or “recce”, squadrons that have recently redeployed. He's preparing another recce squadron to go to theatre. Of note, he just had a tank troop, 25, that just returned. That small troop sustained about 25% casualties. On one of their last days of operations, that particular squadron they worked in hit four IEDs in one day. So you can imagine the experiences they've had, the events they've experienced during their deployment in Afghanistan.

I'd just like to state right off the bat that our absolute priority is to take care of the soldiers. Care of the wounded, care of our soldiers and families is the absolute priority, and we've very good at it. We've learned a lot. I would say that we're one of the best learning institutions.

As a matter of fact, I can even brag a little bit that when I was director of army training, I was part of the key organization that learned the lessons from theatre, brought those lessons back, and translated them into our training that we conduct.

One of those key components was how to care for the soldiers, how to prepare ourselves for casualties, like operational stress casualties. We've come a long way. We're an institution that has really formalized and institutionalized our training for being prepared to deal with soldiers who have operational stress injuries.

We have identified a number of shortfalls. I've been in command about eight months now, and I can say that there are shortfalls. We don't have all the psychiatrists, we don't have all the resources we'd like to have, but we have identified those, and we're in the process with the whole Canadian Forces chain of command to fix those. I can say that we've actually moved quite a long way in respect to improvement. We haven't improved them all, and we'd still like to see more resources, and that's absolutely clear. But again, we've moved a long, long way.

I'd like to emphasize the fact, too, that we're a warrior culture. We have to train the soldiers for combat. It's our absolute priority to make sure that all of the soldiers in our team are prepared to fight a difficult enemy. So that is 100% our focus. They have to be ready at all times to do their job, so that fire team is ready to support each other in combat.

● (1630)

Having said that, and I mentioned it earlier, our care of our soldiers is absolutely critical. Those two are not mutually exclusive. They work together. We prepare the soldiers and we 100% make sure that at the same time we take care of the soldiers and families within our units within our brigade.

We continue to educate with respect to operational stress injuries. It's a difficult subject. It's a difficult thing for us to work through, but I'll tell you, we've learned a lot and we do continue to educate and improve our means of, again, making sure that we do take care of our soldiers.

I think that the culture in the army from that perspective is evolving extremely well. It is our absolute focus. If we find a soldier who does have an operational stress injury, we make sure that they have the right options available, that we can move them to the mental health agencies we have available, and we make sure 100% that we take care of those soldiers.

I've been in the forces 28 years and I've watched our training improve. When soldiers join the forces as recruits, we make sure their training is rigorous, intense. We simulate difficult conditions throughout their training. We make sure they go through live-fire exercises that really do put the stress and the pressure on the soldiers, so when they actually get in theatre, they're 100% prepared for those different difficult circumstances that they could be faced with there. That happens starting, as I mentioned, from the time they're recruits.

My soldiers now are about halfway through their training and we've done a number of exercises where they're faced with simulated casualties. They have to conduct casualty evacuation. They have to conduct first aid. They've gone through rigorous first aid training, operational stress injury training—all of that—to prepare them for theatre.

So with that really as a lead message, I can say that we're well prepared. We still have work to do. We always look to improve our capabilities for taking care of our soldiers. But with that as a lead for you, I think we're doing extremely well.

I really do look forward to the questions that you may have for this group of experienced officers who are in front of you today. Thank you very much.

● (1635)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll open up with a seven-minute round, and we'll start with the official opposition.

Mr. Rota.

Mr. Anthony Rota (Nipissing—Timiskaming, Lib.): Thank you. I'll split my time, if there's some left over, with Mr. McGuire.

Thank you for coming out today. I appreciate it.

I'll just go to the end of your statement, with regard to some of the education and the training that goes on for some of the leaders and the soldiers within the group. With the operational stress injuries, what we're seeing is that most people don't realize they have it at the time. I guess that's where I'm going to go with my question. How do you train someone, whether he's a leader in a group or a soldier, to identify operational stress injuries? How do you go about bringing it to their attention? What do you do to train the leaders so they can identify that there is an illness starting, or there's a bud even or a starting of operational stress disorder?

Col Dean J. Milner: To begin with, that's a great question.

This is something on which our training has evolved over the years. We make sure that they understand and learn to anticipate what exactly operational stress injuries are and what the indications are. For example, if you have a soldier within your platoon and he's starting to act differently, we talk about it, we discuss it with the leadership. If we identify something like that, then we automatically make sure that we debrief that soldier so that we can then put him into the right options, into the mental health chain of command, so we can then debrief him.

As well, we also have soldiers...they have buddies, and these buddies constantly talk to those soldiers. If they identify something that's different—if they've gone through a very stressful operation, for example—we will later debrief those soldiers so that we can then identify anything that is not natural or something that we identified. Then we can do further debriefing afterwards so that we can then point them in the right direction.

We also do enhanced debriefings once we come home as well. These are done through the whole medical chain of command so that we identify things quickly right off the bat, so that again we can make sure we're taking care of these wounded soldiers.

Just to summarize, we train and prepare ourselves to identify and then we conduct debriefings afterwards to make sure that we identify.

Mr. Anthony Rota: Is this ongoing training? Does updating go on? Because I would imagine that you get comfortable with someone; if something happens, and all of a sudden he starts acting differently, after a time you just kind of get used to it.

Do you bring them up to a new level every so often? Does an updating happen, and at what periods does it happen for the individual?

● (1640)

Col Dean J. Milner: We continue to debrief, and I think that's the best way to do it. We've noticed that operational stress injuries can occur at any time. There's no specific timeframe. They could happen during the rotation in theatre. They could happen immediately when they come home. They could happen after six months, nine months, twelve months. I don't think there's any clinical proof of exactly when it could happen.

We continue to debrief with our leadership teams, we continue to talk about these potential stress injuries. The mental health community will debrief, will do enhanced debriefings when they come home and within a four- to six-month period afterwards. And we'll continue to do that as a command team with both the NCOs and the officers. We will continue to look at the possibilities of somebody having an operational stress injury.

So I think we have pretty good means of trying to identify operational stress injuries.

Mr. Anthony Rota: Thank you, Colonel.

I'll pass it on to my colleague Joe.

Hon. Joe McGuire: Thank you, Anthony.

You say you're very soldier-oriented in your preparation and so on. We're finding out that it really should be a family-oriented situation. You've probably read Mr. LeClair's articles in the paper recently, where there's a huge effect on the family, on the wives and children of these returning soldiers, some who have and some who have not sustained injuries in Afghanistan or Bosnia and so on. They really feel helpless because a lot of times they don't know where to go, and they get accused, or their husbands get accused, of milking the system and shirking their duties and not being men, not really being counselled into other employment. There's a whole list of things they're saying they're not getting.

It's not just the soldier; it's a much bigger concentric circle here. What are we doing with regard to a more universal response to these situations?

Col Dean J. Milner: That's a great question. It's very key that I emphasize that, yes, the emphasis is on a solider in warrior culture but the family is absolutely paramount. The importance to us is absolutely critical. We make sure our families are also involved in the preparations to deploy our soldiers over to theatre. We make sure they're aware of all the resources we have, all the capabilities we have to help out from both the mental health capability and the family resource centres, and they have really improved since I was a commanding officer about five or six years ago.

We have a tremendous network and tremendous capability so if the family does have problems they know whom to talk to and how we can help them. Everything we do revolves around the family. It's not just the soldier. A unit is a big family. Everything we do, from parades to organizations, revolves around that family. It's not ever just focused on the soldier.

When the soldier deploys, the absolute focus for me—because unfortunately I'll be staying behind during this deployment—will be on the families. I will make sure they have everything possible that I have available to help them out.

We are improving—

Hon. Joe McGuire: But if they're having problems, how can they get that message to you? I mean, you can't handle everything that....

Col Dean J. Milner: Pardon me?

Hon. Joe McGuire: You rely on people under you to carry out your orders or carry out your policies, and sometimes these people are saying they don't have people who believe them down here, so you'll never hear it up there.

How do you get people to be more sensitive at a lower level instead of accusing these returnees of shirking to get a pension out of it? It's a pretty cruel thing to say to someone who has just come back, or to a wife who has a husband who can't earn a living any more.

Col Dean J. Milner: We definitely sensitize the whole chain of command. We focus and make sure that the chain of command, starting with my NCOs right down to soldiers, are aware of those resources that are available.

We continue to talk to all the families. I speak to the families. I go out and reach out to the families. We have numerous resources within our military community to reach out to the families. I think we're doing everything that we can, but we can do more, there's no doubt it. I think it's that culture of understanding exactly what those challenges could be for the families, reaching out as much as possible. We go out of our way.

Now, are we perfect? No. But I can tell you it's a 100% emphasis for us within the forces to do that. It is a brigade family. They are unit families. And I can say that we are making great improvements from that aspect.

● (1645)

The Chair: Mr. Bachand, for seven minutes.

[*Translation*]

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

Welcome.

[*English*]

You'll need your translation device. You can put it on French or English.

[*Translation*]

Col Dean J. Milner: I can speak French.

Mr. Claude Bachand: Excellent.

Hearing your tone of voice and seeing your self-confidence, I have no doubt that you prepare excellent warriors. I know it because I have trained—and I do not have to apologize for it—with the Royal 22. I am a *Vandoo*.

I would like to know what criteria you use to decide that a soldier is excellent or perfect. Do you believe that a soldier with post-traumatic stress disorder is weaker than a true soldier who will never be affected because he is very strong?

Col Dean J. Milner: Absolutely not. The case is that that soldier may have experienced extremely difficult situations during his deployment. It may be a very tough experience for our soldiers and our duty is to do everything in our power to enable them to face another deployment or to continue their mission within the Canadian Forces.

Mr. Claude Bachand: Let us now talk about the preparations. I have heard it said that some soldiers are less well prepared than others to prevent post-traumatic stress disorder. I have trained with soldiers in difficult situations but we all know that nobody can get killed during training because you are between friends. So, there is a lot of difference between how you may react to enemy fire on the training ground and on the theatre where real events happen.

I have also heard it said that it is very stressful to see your buddy being killed beside you, but we know that this could not happen on the training ground. Even if you prepare them with all kinds of exercises simulating what may happen on the operational theater, such as guns being fired, machine guns being used, etc., they know that things will be different during operations. It is when they reach the operational theater that the real stuff will happen.

Also, they will have to face not only their buddies being killed or injured but also various atrocities being committed.

What methods do you use to prepare them specifically to be able to prevent post-traumatic stress disorder? During training, do you put them in various situations reflecting what they may have to face there?

Col Dean J. Milner: That is a very good question but I will have to answer in English because it may be difficult for me to answer in French.

Mr. Claude Bachand: No problem.

[*English*]

Col Dean J. Milner: It's absolutely important that we prepare the soldiers to the best of our ability, so they're prepared for the difficult situations—those traumatic events they may see in theatre. They might have a buddy who is killed next to them. There are a lot of different atrocities that our soldiers have seen in their deployments to Bosnia, Kosovo, and now, obviously, Afghanistan.

We try, as much as we can, to make the training as realistic as possible. We try to simulate every different possible experience. We put them in extremely stressful situations—under fire. We simulate mass casualty events. These are really difficult periods, where we put them under stress.

We have started to institutionalize some of that training. It's getting better and better each time. You made the point that it is difficult to completely replicate theatre, so we do the best we can. Our soldiers will tell you that they are extremely well prepared. I don't think you can prepare them much better.

We continue to look to other countries. The Americans are evolving new techniques. The Marines take their soldiers into trauma care facilities for a 24-hour period and watch them go through a number of different operations and things like that.

There are different approaches and options that we will continue to look at to make it better for our soldiers.

● (1650)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Claude Bachand: If a doctor, on the operational theater or here in Canada, sees that an individual has post-traumatic stress disorder and mentions it to the commanding officer, is that officer obliged to respect the diagnostic and to release the individual for some time so that he may be treated? Could the commanding officer say that it is not true, as far as he is concerned, and the individual should remain with the group? Does the commanding officer's decision supersede that of the doctor?

Col Dean J. Milner: I apologize but I will have to answer in English.

[*English*]

It's a team. We have our doctors. We have the chain of command. We work extremely closely together. Generally our soldiers end up with our doctors based on recommendations we've had from the chain of command. I can tell you that 99% of the time we respect the doctors and mental health personnel who work for us.

We live, breathe, and fight with those soldiers, so we understand their capabilities and their strengths and weaknesses. But if a doctor or mental health care personnel says that one of our soldiers has an operational stress injury, that soldier will be taken out of the line of battle. We try to get the best resources available for that soldier so he can carry on his work.

The Chair: Sorry, Claude, that's over time.

Ms. Black.

Ms. Dawn Black: Thank you.

Welcome to the committee, and thank you very much for your presentation.

We've extended the mission for another two years, so it will go at least until 2011. We have a limited number of soldiers in the army, so obviously the rotations are going to continue. I've looked at this, and people will be sent back to do second, third, fourth rotations in Afghanistan.

The U.S. Army has just done a study on the issue of stress on soldiers and how it increases as they do more than one rotation. In fact this study says that more than one in four American soldiers show signs of anxiety, depression, acute stress, post-traumatic stress disorder after going back for the third or fourth time. Obviously this is going to continue to be a problem.

It sounds like we're doing the same kind of combat missions, now, that the Americans are doing. This will be an increased risk, I take it, for soldiers who are redeployed over and over again. I'm wondering how many Canadian soldiers are returning to Afghanistan for a second, third, or fourth time, and whether some kind of action will be taken, over and above what you've talked about, for those who are entering perhaps a third or fourth rotation.

● (1655)

Col Dean J. Milner: First of all...and don't hesitate; I can allow my commanding officers to give a bit more detail on the numbers. If you really do want more detailed numbers, we can actually give you those. CO 3 RCR, who is going on the next rotation, knows exactly the number of soldiers going back a second time, a third time, and a fourth time. I'll let him give that to you.

I know that our doctors and our specialists are looking at the same things that the Americans are. There's no doubt that we are learning things from soldiers who have been in combat a second time, a third time, and a fourth time. We do have some of those soldiers. We will continue to learn what's best, but with our operational tempo, as you know, we will continue to send soldiers.

Our training gets better each time. From what we're hearing from our soldiers, in a lot of cases they are better prepared for operations. We will continue to learn how to prepare our soldiers better.

Through our pre-deployment training, we do departure assistance group preparation. If we identify soldiers who aren't prepared to go back, we will take them off training to make sure they don't go into theatre.

Ms. Dawn Black: I'm struck by the fact that 25% on multiple rotations show signs of PTSD, anxiety, and depression. I'm really struck by that. I think it's quite a high number.

Col Dean J. Milner: That is a large number. I don't have those numbers for our forces. You'd have to ask our medical experts.

Ms. Dawn Black: If you're in Afghanistan, and you know you're going out on an operation that has a high probability of trauma, is anything done just before you go out to reduce post-traumatic stress disorder or operational stress injuries? You're going in, you're attacking the Taliban wherever they are and you know there's a high probability of injury and death.

Col Dean J. Milner: The preparations we make before we go into theatre are substantive. But when we're part of the mission, we're a team, and we make sure that the team completely understands the challenge they are going to face in a particular operation. They've conducted a number of similar operations, and we talk about the things that can happen. We work through the whole operation, the different things that could happen. We make sure the team is mentally and physically 100% prepared, battle procedure-wise, for those specific events.

We continue to talk about it. We've learned lessons from other recent traumatic operations. We do a lot to prepare our soldiers for those kinds of operations.

Guys, is there is anything else to add?

Lieutenant-Colonel Roger R. Barrett (Commanding Officer, Third Battalion, Royal Canadian Regiment, Department of National Defence): I'll just amplify that point. In an operation, the ability to have some control of your situation is important. Knowledge is empowering. Before an operation, we process the battle procedure, rehearsing what will happen, possible outcomes. If this happens, so what? If that happens, so what? It's just a terminology we use to get an expected outcome.

Then we rehearse and practise that. Going through the plan with the whole team, down to the last soldier, provides everyone with the knowledge of what he can expect. Nothing may go according to plan, but at least he has that knowledge.

The other thing that every single soldier will know is the next step. If there are casualties, he will know what the process is, how you get your buddy out, how you evacuate back, what the protocol is. So knowledge is empowering, and they have that knowledge.

● (1700)

Ms. Dawn Black: The last question I have deals with the very dramatic testimony we heard in camera. I can't talk about it specifically, but I was struck by the tenor of the testimony from families. This follows up on what Mr. McGuire said, about their feeling of not being part of the process once either their son or partner was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. There was a great deal of angst and disappointment with what didn't happen for the families. They felt they were part of the process for the healing of the solider, but they didn't feel they were given the ability to fully be part of that healing process. From what families are saying, it seems to be an even more dramatic problem with reserve soldiers.

What do you know about what might be happening to rectify that specific problem, to have families actually be part of the process with the counsellor or psychologist?

Also, one of the problems they pointed out vociferously was that getting the diagnosis in the first place was so difficult that they felt it prevented their family member from starting on the road to recovery.

The Chair: I apologize—I hate to cut you off—but we're way over time on this segment.

If you can, give just a short response.

Col Dean J. Milner: I can give you a very quick response, Mr. Chair.

I think the essence of this, the critical point, is awareness. We go out of our way to make sure the families are briefed from the beginning—throughout our training, during our deployments, and afterwards—so that they're aware of all of the resources and capabilities we have. If a soldier is injured, we automatically put an officer with that family. We make them aware of all the resources we have. We connect them with the medical people, our mental health capabilities, our specialists, and if something does happen, everybody is aware of everything that's happening. It's a tight family.

These are examples, I guess.... We're not doing it in every case, but I'll tell you, we go out of our way to make sure that the families.... I speak to families. I talk to soldiers. I debrief soldiers. My commanding officers do, my NCOs do. We go out of our way to make sure that we do that. We will continue to improve our outreach and our means of making sure that the families are aware. The families need to continue to come to us if they're not getting the complete information that they'd like.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ms. Gallant.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant (Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, CPC): Thank you very much.

Thank you to each of you for the personal sacrifices you have put forth in training our soldiers to the top-notch calibre that you referred to.

I can attest to the evolution of your training, having had the benefit of participating in pre-deployment exercises, even from back in the days of Bosnia in 2001, and the different "rotos" for Afghanistan. Definitely, even within a year there are new lessons learned and applied right on the ground.

An hon. member: Definitely at...[*Inaudible—Editor*]

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: It is top-calibre. It's a good thing my colleague is with the Royal 22nd, because I'm not sure he'd make it in any other regiment.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Colonel Milner, I understand you will be in charge of the rear party. What we heard when we visited base Petawawa during our study on Afghanistan was that even with a rear party, while the families who are associated with a regiment, who have a regimental family, were very well taken care of, the people from the service battalion, and people whose spouses are not members of a regiment, seemed to slip through the cracks. They did not receive their pre-deployment booklet that families get until well into the deployment. They didn't hear about all the activities going on during this time. Again, as you mentioned, the post-deployment, getting them ready for their spouses' coming back, is critical so they can recognize the signs that we're referring to.

In this rotation, what measures are you taking to ensure that fewer people fall through the cracks?

● (1705)

Col Dean J. Milner: We've learned lessons and we continue to learn lessons. Our resources are improved, as I think are our means of communicating the resources that we have.

We've developed a deployment support centre that now has soldiers from all of these different units actually working out of this centre. In the past we haven't necessarily had all of those troops integrated. Right off the bat, if there are soldiers from some of these outlying units, we now have specific personnel who work in this deployment support centre who are the first point of contact. So we can now outreach to those other units to make sure they have complete access to all of those great resources that we're continuing to develop.

Again, we push that knowledge back out to them as well. We continue to improve the passage of communication and awareness of all the things we can do through those different and improved means.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: While our focus in this study is operational stress injuries, there are, of course, physical injuries. With the IEDs being the predominant reason that our soldiers are being injured, there are certain injuries that we see more and more. Are there pieces of kit that our soldiers are asking for that we might not necessarily have adequate numbers of, or have at all in theatre?

I know we now have the tanks, which are very protective. You've been a proponent since the days they talked about taking them away to Wainwright. But in addition to the big kit, the personal kit, is there anything they need or have been asking for that you can relay to this committee?

Col Dean J. Milner: I can tell you right off the bat that the Canadian Forces, the army, has done its utmost to evolve and improve our equipment for the soldiers. I can tell you, having been to theatre a number of times, that I think as most of you are aware, the equipment that our soldiers have is some of the best, if not the best. But there are always things that we can improve upon. As a matter of fact, soldiers bring that up constantly. There are always little bits we learn from the Americans and from the Brits.

General Leslie, who takes a very keen interest in this subject, was down with my soldiers in Texas during the latter parts of our deployment, and there were some specific questions to him on everything from throat protectors to better-protecting eyeglass wear.

We continue to look at that. From an army perspective, we continue to learn lessons and push them up, and I can tell you, the responses have been quick, in most cases.

So yes, we are definitely looking at means of improving our equipment, because we know the challenges we've had with IEDs in theatre. There is newer equipment; there is better protection. I'm seeing it put on in theatre, onto the vehicles, and there is other equipment, so that we can save more lives.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: The problem that the professionals at CFB Petawawa tell me we have is that we're understaffed, which you alluded to. Valcartier has 40 staff; Halifax, 30; and Edmonton, 30. Valcartier and Edmonton have roughly the same number of soldiers as CFB Petawawa, yet we have only 16 staff and two part-timers to do the same job.

We know there is a difficulty in attracting medical personnel to the military. Has the military considered something as simple as offering more money to get staff to situate themselves at Petawawa?

Col Dean J. Milner: Absolutely. As a matter of fact, I can't speak 100% on behalf of our doctors, General Jaeger, as well as General Semianiw. We brought a number of personnel, first of all, to Petawawa to show them and make it clear exactly what resources we have. We know that we don't have enough and we know that it's an absolute focus for the Canadian Forces to give us more. I think right now we're looking at more civilian capabilities in that regard. We'll pay them through Calian.

So yes, I think, 100%, the forces are looking at different means of attracting more of those very important capabilities. We don't have enough. We know it. We need more. So I know that a number of different options are being looked at to increase our capabilities.

● (1710)

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: With the increased tempo and shorter lengths of time between deployments, there's an increased stress on the soldiers, in back-to-back. I'd like you to give me some assurances for the families that because they've been there several times already, if they do need it, the help will be there, and especially for the families who have soldiers injured in theatre, where they don't have that time to decompress or the time to slowly go back to their families while still interacting with their military buddies. They're just plunged right back home without that soft landing.

What kind of assurances can you give to us for the families?

Col Dean J. Milner: I can tell you right off the bat that even in the eight months I've been in command, the capabilities and resources we now have within the base—and I'm very keen to show those to everybody—have improved immensely.

We have a warrior support centre. When I first arrived in that warrior support centre, it was almost empty. We have now filled it with, again, more personnel who can help the families, more personnel who can help the soldiers if they're wounded. There is easier access. That awareness is being pushed out to the families in all respects, so they are aware of it, and they will continue to be made aware of it, before their deployments and through their deployments.

We still need more, absolutely. But please come and visit. It's been really gratifying for me to see how things have improved over the last few years, even the recent eight months, since I was a CO the last time. So I think you can feel reassured that the situation is better.

The Chair: Thank you.

That ends the opening round. I was a bit generous with the time to each of you because the responses were so good, but we have some other business that we need to deal with.

Now, I don't know how many committee members can stay for a few minutes after 5:30 so that we can continue to question these witnesses. Or do you want to stop now and move on? I leave it up to you. I know that some of you have more questions, or you didn't get the full answers to your last ones. If we get started on the next round, it will take 35 minutes to complete it.

We can stop? Okay.

Gentlemen, I know you're only an hour and a half down the road, but we still appreciate very much your coming today. The responses were great. With the passing notes back and forth, it's pretty clear how the structure works in the military here, who's in charge of it.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: Thank you, all, for what you've done. Some have been over to Afghanistan and have come back and are going again, and some are getting ready to go. One of the issues we want to deal with next in our future business is we want to get out to see some of the last in-depth training that gets done before our soldiers go, to prepare them.

I'd just like to make one comment. I think I've seen numerous times in interviews some of our soldiers saying, “I don't really know what happened, but my training just kicked in and we did the deal.” I think that's exactly what you're telling us you try to reach before people are deployed.

Again, thank you very much.

Do have just a few closing comments you'd like to make, sir, before we dismiss you?

Col Dean J. Milner: No, I'd just like to thank you for the opportunity. Please come and visit. We have really improved our capabilities, and the soldiers love to talk to you. They'll tell you how it is. I know we have some challenges, but please do come to Wainwright. I know you've had some opportunities to go to Afghanistan.

We are not far down the road, and we're really keen to show off what we have and the training we do. So please do come. An hour and a half is not far. I know that everybody is busy, but please come down for a visit.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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