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Chair: Mr. Bryan May



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• (1540)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Bryan May (Cambridge, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 23 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs. Today's meeting is taking place in the hybrid format that we are now becoming used to.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on October 27, 2020, the committee is resuming its study on a strategy for commemorations in the 21st century.

I'd like to welcome all the witnesses who have taken the time to join us today.

The meeting today is broken up into two hours. In the first hour, we're going to be meeting with Department of Veterans Affairs officials. I will introduce all of you and explain the second hour as well. Then we'll come back to give you an opportunity for opening remarks.

First off, I'll introduce Mr. Rick Christopher, assistant deputy minister, strategic policy and commemoration; retired Colonel Michael Pearson, director, commemoration operations; and Paul Thomson, director general, commemoration division.

We'll be joined in the second hour by the Royal Canadian Legion, from which we have Mr. Steven Clark, national executive director.

Mr. Christopher will start us off in the first hour.

You have five minutes for your opening remarks.

Mr. Rick Christopher (Assistant Deputy Minister, Strategic Policy and Commemoration, Department of Veterans Affairs): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*Translation*]

Good afternoon, Mr. Chair, members of the committee. It is a pleasure to be here today.

[*English*]

I would like to begin by acknowledging that the land from which Paul and I are talking to you is the traditional and unceded territory of the Abegweit Mi'kmaq first nation.

On this day 104 years ago, at 3:45 a.m., the 27th Canadian infantry battalion advanced over an open plain under heavy shelling towards the town of Fresnoy, France. While most of the battalion

was stopped short of the objective, Lieutenant Robert Combe led five men across the line. Using his opponents' own grenades, he cleared the trench and captured 80 enemy soldiers. Once his position was secured by reinforcements, Lieutenant Combe continued to advance until he was killed by an enemy sniper. He had been in France for two weeks.

Lieutenant Combe was laid to rest in the field cemetery at Acheville, France, which was later destroyed in the fighting. His name, along with the names of 11,284 other Canadian soldiers with no known graves, is inscribed on the Vimy Memorial.

I've told you this story because it is our privilege and obligation to continue the sacred tradition of remembering and honouring all those who have served and given so much to Canada and Canadians.

[*Translation*]

This has become much more challenging during the past year. The pandemic has continued to test the mettle of all Canadians, including veterans and their families, members of the Canadian Forces and the RCMP. The Department of Veterans Affairs and many organizations that support veterans have shown their resilience and flexibility by adjusting their approach in the face of the pandemic. I am proud of what we have accomplished.

[*English*]

In May 2020, we marked the 75th anniversary of the liberation of the Netherlands and the end of the Second World War in Europe. An overseas delegation was planned, including the participation of a veteran delegation at a number of ceremonies in Europe. Sadly, this had to be postponed to a later date.

However, to recognize this important anniversary, we produced a virtual ceremony. The video received over 125,000 views on Facebook. We also reached out to schools, youth and community groups across Canada and distributed bilingual learning resources with a focus on the liberation of the Netherlands.

For the first time in history, in 2020, Veterans' Week was held virtually. Through livestreaming ceremonies, online learning resources, Faces of Freedom podcasts, and streaming videos of the Kipnes Lantern and the virtual poppy drop, we were able to bring Canadians together.

The candlelight tribute ceremony, which also takes place every year during Veterans' Week, was held virtually. The video featured veterans in long-term care facilities across Canada and was viewed over 64,000 times.

In March, we highlighted the contribution of women in uniform on our social media channels. We ran a campaign that focused on sharing the stories of more than a dozen women veterans from diverse backgrounds during the "They proudly served" series. This sparked meaningful conversations about their experiences in the Canadian Armed Forces.

One of our objectives is to educate youth to ensure that they continue to carry the torch of remembrance. Previously, youth representatives were an important part of our overseas delegations for significant anniversaries. We have had to find new ways to keep our youth connected and engaged.

The commemoration division's learning unit has connected with over 57,000 educators and youth leaders interested in receiving our learning materials. We continue to send information to educator partners on new materials, events and anniversaries related to remembrance throughout the year, so that they can be shared with young Canadians.

• (1545)

[Translation]

The Minister of Veterans Affairs awarded commendations virtually this year to 67 recipients. These are usually awarded in person to individuals who have contributed in an exemplary manner to the care and well-being of veterans or to the remembrance of the contributions, sacrifices and achievements of veterans.

[English]

Last year, our commemorative partnership program approved over \$1.6 million for 158 projects across the country. The department continued to support organizations with initiatives that honour those who served in Canada during times of war, military conflict and peace.

For example, the program funded the Niagara Military Museum's exhibit on the Black military history of Niagara. The exhibit featured personal stories of service from various conflicts, including the First and Second World Wars, the Korean War, and Afghanistan. The project included online materials, study guides and fact sheets, and has travelled to a number of schools across the region.

I want to take this opportunity to provide the committee with our vision of the future of commemoration. The department developed a 10-year commemoration strategic plan in partnership with the ministerial advisory group on commemorations. This plan outlines how we will help Canadians understand how service advances peace and global security, inspire Canadians to actively recognize the services of sacrifices of all who serve, and preserve memorials and grave markers in a sustainable and dignified way.

Through 2021, the department will consult with veterans and other Canadians to seek their views on our approach and hear their ideas on how best to remember Canadian military missions and recognize those who have served our country in war and in peace.

At Veterans Affairs Canada, despite the pandemic, we are continuing to connect with Canadians in new ways to ensure we recognize our veterans, their sacrifices and their service to our country. We are using these new approaches, adopted out of necessity, to change the way we honour our past and commemorate in the future.

Thank you.

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

I see that Mr. Desilets has joined us, so we'll say bon voyage to Alexis.

We're going to suspend for just a moment to do Mr. Desilets's sound check.

• (1545)

(Pause)

• (1545)

The Chair: We're back. Mr. Doherty will start us off, for six minutes.

Mr. Todd Doherty (Cariboo—Prince George, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Christopher, did you say there was \$1.6 million for 158 projects?

Mr. Rick Christopher: Yes, that is correct. That is the commemorative partnership program. It's community-based. There are smaller, community programs for initiatives, and some larger initiatives. It varies from year to year, but that's about it.

Mr. Todd Doherty: That would be roughly \$10,126 for each project. Is that correct?

Mr. Rick Christopher: That's correct. I don't have the math in front of me, but yes, that sounds like a proper average.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Do you feel that's enough?

Mr. Rick Christopher: I do. Every year, the program is heavily subscribed. The recipients are very eager and keen to get that funding, and provide the support.

This year was a bit different in that we had to shift dramatically, because some of the events we supported were in-person events, so that changed the focus. We certainly spent a lot of time working with some of these organizations to make sure we were able to continue to fund them; we worked with them to figure out what their new way of commemorating would look like during the pandemic.

• (1550)

Mr. Todd Doherty: How do you think the 40,000 veterans of the war in Afghanistan should be commemorated?

Mr. Rick Christopher: The department is certainly working on a strategy to make sure we are commemorating the modern veterans. We've shifted, over the past several years, from a more traditional, single large conflict type of commemoration, where you had a fairly homogenous group of veterans who served during those times.

We're moving towards a more modern approach, where we're looking at more regional types of conflicts. Obviously, we have the Afghanistan memorial, which we're working on in partnership with Heritage Canada and the National Capital Commission.

Perhaps Paul could give you a little more information on that.

Mr. Todd Doherty: I have another question, actually, and perhaps both of you could answer.

As you know, many of our veterans are suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, moral injury or mental health injury. Many of them choose death by suicide.

Are we going to commemorate the loss of life of those who are struggling, have struggled and have lost the fight, due to their service? If so, how?

Mr. Rick Christopher: What I would say to that is, yes, we are going to commemorate and we do commemorate those. One suicide is obviously too many. The department has any number of programs to try to make sure that number is as small as it possibly can be and hopefully zero. That being said, if someone has a mental health injury, we do not differentiate between mental health and physical conditions. If someone unfortunately is to die from their condition related to the service, we commemorate them as we would any other soldier or veteran.

Mr. Todd Doherty: That's good to hear.

Mr. Christopher, has the consultation process for the commemoration strategy started?

Mr. Rick Christopher: Yes. The consultation process has started. I will say that in developing the strategy we worked very closely with the commemoration advisory group and then began to consult and share some of the strategy. We're going to be going out more widely. Of course, the pandemic put a bit of a loop in things, but certainly Paul can expand on the plan a bit.

Mr. Todd Doherty: With that, which groups have been consulted and for which ones is there a plan to consult?

Mr. Rick Christopher: Do you want to take that, Paul?

Mr. Paul Thomson (Director General, Commemoration Division, Department of Veterans Affairs): Sure. Thanks, Rick.

MP Doherty, we've consulted and, as Rick alluded to, we've collaborated with the minister's commemorative advisory group. They've been a key resource but also a significant input into the development of it. We have talked to a number of other groups and socialized a plan with our DND colleagues, with other entities and other organizations out there, including youth organizations and others, to ensure that we are getting the feedback we need. We're

going to continue to do that. The key point here is that the plan as it stands now is a draft consultative version, and that is going to remain the case as we continue to socialize this plan and get feedback.

One of the fundamental themes of the plan is that we want to develop content and initiatives in expanding our focus to focus more on younger veterans, more recent conflicts and peacekeeping initiatives.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Thank you for that.

When do you expect the consultation process to wrap up?

Mr. Paul Thomson: It's an ongoing process. Again, we're going to be implementing the plan and iterating, learning and developing as we go. At this point, I'm hesitant to say when the actual final version will be done, because I think it's more important to get that valuable feedback from key audiences and key stakeholders. That way, like I said, we can continue to iterate and develop that content and expand our focus so we're resonating with some of our key audiences and the under-represented communities that we want to increase our focus on.

• (1555)

The Chair: Thanks, Todd.

Up next is MP Lalonde, for six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Marie-France Lalonde (Orléans, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Christopher, I would like to thank you for your presentation, and especially for your leadership during a very difficult year.

[*English*]

I wanted to discuss the shift or expansion of focus from World War II and the Korean War to more recent engagements like the war in Afghanistan or peacekeeping missions, as well as the RCMP. Thinking about the shift, will this change in focus alter how VAC approaches its commemorative activities?

Mr. Rick Christopher: Mr. Chair, there are a number of things. As I mentioned in my opening remarks, there's been a shift to the point where 94% of the veterans we serve are considered to be modern veterans. I don't like the name, but it's the one we're using right now. Post Korea would be another way to describe it. The places where these veterans have served are across the world, as I mentioned. They're not one single conflict, so there are a number of groups, associations and veterans organizations that would like to commemorate those missions. That's one consideration.

The other is really that the technology has changed. We're moving from a situation where the emphasis was on in-person events; any of the social media applications that we would do would be an add-on or a bit of an afterthought. Now, really, it's hand and glove with both of these: in-person events where possible during these times, but also heavy on the social media.

Paul, do you want to talk about Canada and the world, and what we're doing in terms of having particular years where we would be doing a particular area in the world?

Mr. Paul Thomson: Thanks, Mr. Chair.

This is just to flag the fact that our focus on younger veterans and more recent conflicts is not at the expense of our work with respect to the First World War, the Second World War and the older, traditional milestones. We are expanding our scope. We are not changing the key things we do for the First World War and the Second World War. We're just expanding.

As Rick said, one of the key themes or ideas that we had in our strategic plan for our more recent conflicts and younger veterans was to focus on these regions, so we do five-year cycles of regions, including Canada. Whether it's the Middle East one year and Asia, Africa and the Americas, including Canada, the next, our purpose is to recognize, acknowledge and inform Canadians about the service and sacrifice of younger veterans.

Going back to an earlier question with regard to PTSD, I think one of the key roles that commemoration can play is to help younger veterans accept and embrace their identity as veterans and validate their service and sacrifice. We can contribute in this way to veteran well-being and facilitate their transition, whether they're transitioning from being a CAF member to being a civilian member of society or just being recognized and feeling validated within their own communities for their contribution, service and sacrifice. That's a role we can play and are playing with regard to our veterans.

Mrs. Marie-France Lalonde: Thank you very much. I have to agree. I represent Orleans, where a large number of veterans and active members live.

Mr. Christopher, I want to come back to one thing you mentioned regarding this pandemic and how things have changed and really forced us to adapt a lot of our commemorative activities. Certainly here in Orleans, where we usually had thousands of people, we had to scale down. I think there were only 25 people. This new, virtual form of commemoration is now a language that we're having this discussion about.

May I ask what the VAC team at the department has taken from this experience that could play a role in commemorative strategies once the pandemic has passed?

Mr. Rick Christopher: Mr. Chair, we've done a number of things and we've learned a number of lessons.

When we realized that the ceremony for the 75th anniversary of the liberation of the Netherlands was not going to happen, we had to immediately shift gears. I have to say that it tested the resilience of our people, but we came through and were able to give what I would consider an excellent commemoration online.

We learned a number of things in terms of how we can deliver content virtually and how it can support or be on its own. If you think about the virtual candlelight ceremony that I mentioned, I saw that and was very impressed and touched. The big lessons are that it's okay to commemorate virtually when you have to, and that you can reach a much wider audience. People who wouldn't normally go out to these ceremonies can now access this material online at any time. It doesn't have to be 11:00 a.m. on November 11.

• (1600)

Mrs. Marie-France Lalonde: With only 15 seconds left, I'm just going to say thank you very much for your presentation, and again, for the great leadership in the department.

The Chair: Thank you, MP Lalonde.

Next we have MP Desilets for six minutes.

[*Translation*]

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

My regards to my colleagues and our witnesses.

It is very kind of you to take part in this exercise.

My first question is for Mr. Christopher.

Mr. Christopher, I would like to talk to you about financial support for overseas memorial sites. My office has received a request for financial support for the restoration of the Canadian memorial at Mont-des-Cats. Although it is in France and managed by a non-profit organization in France, of course, the memorial actively commemorates the participation of French Canadian soldiers in the Great War.

Correct me if I'm wrong, but the commemorative partnership program was established to assist organizations undertaking remembrance initiatives. The Veterans Affairs Canada website states that the program can provide funding to organizations in Canada and abroad. However, I did some digging and found information that the program has, until recently, excluded foreign recipients.

As a first step, can you confirm that the program does in fact provide funding for Canadian commemorative sites such as the Mont-des-Cats memorial?

Mr. Rick Christopher: I can confirm that the program does provide support for overseas memorial sites. That was the case with the Juno Beach Centre. However, in the specific situation you just mentioned, I don't know all the details. I don't know whether an application has been submitted. I could ask my office to provide me with the details, if you wish.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Yes, that would be very kind of you.

My understanding is that there has been a change.

Now, what were the reasons for the department expanding its support?

Mr. Rick Christopher: Are you talking about the support for the Juno Beach Centre?

Mr. Luc Desilets: I'm talking about the commemorative partnership program. There have been changes, as I understand it.

Mr. Rick Christopher: Yes, that's right.

The conditions have changed, because some small communities, especially indigenous communities, cannot afford to pay for an event or a monument. They have to share the costs. For these reasons, changes have been made. In some cases, the department will cover 100% of the costs.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you.

I would like to ask a question about another area.

The departmental plan of Veterans Affairs Canada earmarks \$43 million for commemoration. It is a significant amount of money, and it's justified. There will no doubt be a number of commemorative activities, but I suspect that this will not be enough to meet all the demands.

There seems to be a problem with the investments in memorial restoration and conservation. Short-term assistance is often available—again, those are some good amounts—but there is rarely long-term financial security for the organizations.

Is Veterans Affairs Canada satisfied with what it is providing in terms of long-term financial security for small and large Canadian commemorative sites?

• (1605)

Mr. Rick Christopher: I would like to start by saying that we get a lot of requests in a financial year. A lot of organizations have built monuments or sites with private sector donations but have run out of funds because of the pandemic or other reasons. So they apply to the department for more funding to maintain or restore monuments.

I think they are free to apply to the program, but the challenge is certainly ongoing, because monuments are being built and we wonder whose responsibility it is to maintain them. Is it the responsibility of Canadians? We have to figure out what to do in the long term. Often, organizations build monuments and the Government of Canada is left with the responsibility to maintain them. So we frequently talk to those groups to see what their long-term management plan is for the sites.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you very much.

[English]

The Chair: Excellent, everyone's staying on time today. This is fantastic.

Up next we have MP Angus for six minutes, please.

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Thank you so much, Chair, and thanks so much to all of you for this presentation.

I'd like to say right off the top that I want to thank the Veterans Affairs staff in the Kirkland Lake office for the the incredible work they do. They do really important work for veterans and, to me, their professionalism and their dedication are very inspiring.

I would also like to say that I think we're in a very difficult time right now because of COVID, which has really interrupted many of the efforts of Legions and of commemorations. I think we have to really be aware of that and try to bring this back when we're coming out of COVID.

I'd like to say first off that having been at the 75th anniversary of the battle of Italy, and also in Normandy, I was incredibly moved by the welcome we received and the way the events were handled. I was at the dedication of the bridge in Caen in commemoration of Captain George Gilbert Reynolds. The response of people in Caen when they saw that we were there to commemorate a Canadian was incredibly emotional. People really felt that connection.

The reality is that we're not going to have very many more trips with the veterans, if any at all, because of their age. How do you see us maintaining these connections that we've established in the Netherlands, Holland, Belgium and Italy—connections that we've built up over the years with these visits with the veterans? How do we maintain those connections?

Mr. Rick Christopher: First, I'll say that it was very disappointing, I think, to veterans who were slated to go to the Netherlands 75th pilgrimage. It was very disappointing to staff, who had done a lot of work and were very much looking forward to this. I will say that for this I still have some hope, maybe not for this year, but for the following year, understanding that people are getting older and have challenges.

We're there at the invitation of these groups, and certainly in terms of current discussions they're obviously taken up with other issues right now in these countries, but as we go forward, as Paul mentioned earlier, we're continuing to make sure we're not disengaging from or failing to commemorate the more traditional veterans. We will continue to have smaller visits, I think, to some of these areas, making sure we're engaging at the grassroots level with these organizations, because they are hosting us and we want to make sure we have strong ties to a number of these countries and a number of these organizations in these countries. We want to make sure we're maintaining those.

As we shift to veterans commemorations around the world, we will include Europe, for instance, and we will still commemorate the First World War and the Second World War, just in a different way.

• (1610)

Mr. Charlie Angus: Thank you for that.

Something one of the local Italian guides said when we were at Cassino struck me. He works with the Americans when they're there, and with the New Zealanders, the Australians and the Brits. He said that what really struck him about Canadian commemoration events is that we very much include our young people, and he thought that was really a unique and important thing for Canada.

How do we maintain these trips so that young people can see that and can be there as our goodwill ambassadors and come back with a greater understanding of the sacrifice?

Mr. Rick Christopher: Absolutely, one of the things we're focusing on is youth engagement. One of the ways we used to do that was to have youth guides at the Vimy memorial. They were really our youth ambassadors. We have them doing other commemorative activities right now, but we want to make sure we continue to engage the youth and include them in all our commemoration activities, whether they be visits on a smaller scale or even some of the virtual things that we're doing. They've done some fantastic work for us instead of going to Vimy as guides this past year.

Mr. Charlie Angus: The question that leads me into is one on the modern veterans. For all the incredible trauma of the Second World War—I haven't been privy to the events of the First World War—we have the sense of freedom and the sense of the welcome that we get, yet many of our modern veterans have fought in much tougher and much more inhospitable territory in terms of Somalia, the Medak Pocket and Afghanistan.

Those are places that in all likelihood we're not going to be travelling to and doing big commemorations in. How do we incorporate those experiences in order for veterans, their families and Canadians to understand the trauma that happened in those places, and as a way of building a sense of national healing and also personal healing for the veterans who were in those really rough campaigns?

Mr. Paul Thomson: If I can jump in, Mr. Chair, it's a very good question. Again, it just highlights the importance of ongoing consultation so we ensure that what we do resonates, makes a difference and recognizes younger veterans and their service and sacrifice.

We are going to continue to consult and make sure we are working that way. We are going to continue to ensure that they are part of how we construct these new commemorative activities. We're calling it a bit of co-creation, if you will. We're working with them as part of how these kinds of new things will happen.

As you know, the challenge is different. For traditional wars, it's easier. We're good at it because there was a start and an end to a conflict or war. It's a bit different with modern conflicts. We have to figure out how to better commemorate those and make them resonate with Canadians, but also how to make it work for those veterans and make sure we're doing the right thing by them as well.

I would encourage folks, committee members, if you haven't, to listen to the virtual panel we did. We did three, actually, but listen to the one from last Thursday night on digital remembrance. I think that's going to be an important facet for us going forward as well. We need to be where they are. We need to be on those digital channels we talked about earlier that those folks are on, to make sure we're resonating with them.

We have to get away from commemoration being a long ago and far away thing, and make sure it's also here and now, and relevant now. That's our challenge. We're learning and we're working, and we're iterating as we go.

The Chair: Thank you, sir.

Up next we have, for five minutes, MP Wagantall, please.

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

Thank you for the work you're doing. I can't stress enough how important I see this being, and I really look forward to the changes. I had the amazing experience of travelling over to France for the celebration of the Battle of Amiens and Canada's 100 days, and the amazing work that our armed forces did during World War I to turn the tide. That experience was life-changing. You know, this generation is so much involved in digital platforms that I don't believe it will necessarily do what we hope it will do, to some degree, although of course I understand the need.

I'm just wondering if there's been a sense of possibly incorporating current veterans and their families into that opportunity to go to experience what I experienced. Members of Parliament go. Bureaucrats go. Those who suffered through those wars have been, but we're losing that cohort. To give them and their families a sense of what they have contributed to, based on the foundations of our armed forces, would be something to consider going forward, when we will be back to being able to travel.

• (1615)

Mr. Paul Thomson: If I can jump in, Mr. Chair, it's a great point. We always need to continue to be innovative and look for ways to involve families.

One thing I'll highlight—and I think MP Angus will remember this—is that when we did our trip to Normandy we'd do burials. If we located remains and could identify the remains of a fallen soldier, we would invite the family to come with us and participate in the burial over there, and participate in our whole delegation. We did that, and we want to do more of those kinds of things. Your point is well taken, and we are continuing to look at ways to involve the families, not only in our ceremonies but also in our delegations.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: That's great. As I think about the fact that I got to go, I have an incredible desire to see my children and grandchildren have that experience, maybe just to light that fire. I can see how challenging it would be to do that.

In our notes, it reads, "Lastly, the 10-year strategic plan calls for the completion of the national monument to Canada's mission in Afghanistan on LeBreton Flats in Ottawa." Where is that mission right now in terms of seeing that come to fruition? What's the date that we can tell them this is going to be completed?

Mr. Rick Christopher: Mr. Chair, I'll start with some of the challenges we face, and I'll let Paul wrap it up.

I will tell you that we've been working hard with our partners at Heritage and the National Capital Commission. Of course, the pandemic hit. We've even done some things like use drone imagery to help the five finalists who have been selected do a virtual site visit. There have been some delays because of that, and we're working hard to make sure we get this. We continue this despite some of the challenges, and we will make sure there will be a meaningful place for veterans and all Canadians to commemorate Afghanistan.

Did you want to talk about some timelines, Paul?

Mr. Paul Thomson: A key one is upcoming. Our phase two of the consultation work is coming. Rick alluded to the fact that we are down to five finalists who have been working diligently on their design concepts. They are going to be presenting those concepts to the Canadian public very shortly—in mid to late May.

As Rick said, unfortunately, it all has to be virtual. We're going to open it up to key stakeholders first—that is, families and others.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: That was my question.

Mr. Paul Thomson: They will be able to look at the concepts and provide their feedback. Then we'll open it up to the public for the same. That's a key upcoming phase that we are getting into in terms of consultation.

Once that happens, we will select the jury. Based on all the feedback, we'll select a winner.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: How many years down the road is this? You must have a sense.

Mr. Paul Thomson: In terms of picking a winner, this is all going to happen within the next three to four months—in early fall. Once the winning design architect is chosen, they'll go away and work on their actual design and the actual monument. That's going to take some time.

It's slated now for a November 2024 unveiling. Times could shift in light of the situation we're in.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: I have another question I would like to ask really quickly.

With this regional approach and this annual revolving calendar, I assume that's mostly around the whole digital concept. What veterans groups were engaged in the research on that decision to go with that regional approach?

The Chair: That's your time, unfortunately, but I will allow for a quick answer please.

● (1620)

Mr. Paul Thomson: We've consulted with our commemoration advisory group, which includes groups like the Royal Canadian Legion and other veterans organizations, along with seeking feedback from key stakeholders, including youth, women's groups—

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Are actual veterans groups considered within that stakeholder group?

Mr. Paul Thomson: Absolutely. Key veterans groups make up part of our commemoration advisory group.

We are going to be consulting on our plan using the new Let's Talk Veterans platform very shortly as well. We're broadening that engagement but focusing absolutely on making sure we have feedback from veterans groups.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

MP Casey, you have five minutes, please.

Mr. Sean Casey (Charlottetown, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Welcome to our witnesses. I heard Mr. Christopher say he was coming to us today from the traditional territory of the Mi'kmaq. I know where that is.

I want to make sure Mr. Pearson gets a chance to get into Hansard here.

Are you coming to us from Ottawa or New Brunswick, Mr. Pearson?

Colonel (Retired) Michael Pearson (Director, Commemorations Operations, Department of Veterans Affairs): I'm in New Brunswick, sir.

Mr. Sean Casey: Welcome. It's nice to have you here.

Col (Ret'd) Michael Pearson: Thank you very much.

Mr. Sean Casey: Mr. Christopher and Mr. Thomson, I can see you're at the national headquarters of the Department of Veterans Affairs. I'm going to put in a little plug for the folks downtown who very much look forward to seeing your full teams back in the headquarters there at the Daniel J. MacDonald Building or the Jean Canfield or one of the other spaces you occupy. The provincial government seems to have figured out how they're able to work in downtown Charlottetown, and the business community looks very much forward to you folks doing the same.

I want to start with a phenomenon that is certainly very evident in Prince Edward Island. I expect you're going to tell me it goes much broader than that.

We really have seen a dramatic increase in recent years of attendance at commemoration events, domestically. If you've gone to the Charlottetown cenotaph in the last five years, the crowd seems to get bigger every year.

Surely you've recognized this phenomenon. How do you explain it?

Mr. Rick Christopher: I've certainly recognized it. I am forever invited to go to Mount Stewart, not far from town here, to attend their ceremony and represent the department. I've noticed that the crowds are getting bigger.

As much as I would like to take the credit for the department, there are a number of very strong grassroots organizations that are hosting these events. Although we support them—depending on the event, we provide financial and other support—they deserve a lot of the credit for getting people out. Some of it is awareness. Some of it is the veteran community. I'm not just talking about pre-Korea. I think a lot of younger veterans are very much active in the veteran community in getting the word out.

For some reason, Canadians are just much more aware and more interested.

Paul, do you have any theories?

Mr. Paul Thomson: No. I will ask my colleague Michael to weigh in, but I think it's the ongoing work we do with the Royal Canadian Legion across the country on some of those commemorative activities, especially, obviously, during Remembrance Day. I think Mr. Clark will say the same, that as an organization we work well with them and they work with us to make sure we're putting on good commemorative ceremonies and other innovative activities as well, as part of Veterans' Week.

Michael, I don't know if you have anything else to add on that.

Col (Ret'd) Michael Pearson: I have a personal experience.

I left the uniform in 2014, and in the last 10 years of my career, you're right, the interest from the Canadian public was growing. We could feel it on the bases. We could feel it in the streets. You could experience it. I only joined Veterans Affairs a couple of years ago, but there is a real sense that it is a meaningful and important experience. I'd like to think that the program work that Paul and Rick and others are responsible for has only magnified it.

Thank you.

• (1625)

Mr. Sean Casey: Thank you.

Another phenomenon that we see in Prince Edward Island, which I know isn't unique across the country, is the changing face of our community and the impact that immigration has had. Part of your mandate, as I understand it, is to figure out ways to involve new Canadians. Can you expand on that a bit?

Mr. Rick Christopher: Sure. Before I hand it over to Paul, I was reading a stat the other day that 21% of Canadians were not born in Canada, so what you're saying is absolutely true. The profile of Canadians has changed dramatically, and certainly in little old P.E.I. we are seeing this as well. Part of our challenge, of course, is how we engage this cohort of Canadians.

Paul.

The Chair: Reply very briefly, please.

Mr. Paul Thomson: Thank you.

We continue to engage with that community to ensure that, because they come from other countries where their war experience is different from ours, we seek their feedback and try to make sure what we're doing is resonating with new Canadians. We're trying, and we're learning as we go, as I said, based on consultations. Storytelling and personal profiles—those kinds of things resonate with new Canadians. Involving them in some of those activities and making sure we continue to target them, if you will, with key messages is important.

The Chair: Thank you.

MP Desilets, you have two and a half minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

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

Mr. Christopher, I would like you to answer my question. I often have the impression that RCMP veterans are forgotten in everything that we might say or do. When we talk about commemoration, I don't see how they can be included, given their work.

Is anything done for them? Are there any commemorative activities, or is something being explored, for our friends in the RCMP?

Mr. Rick Christopher: Mr. Chair, that is certainly a good point.

The RCMP members put themselves in harm's way like everyone else, and they are considered veterans. They are even involved in some of the overseas conflicts. We need to keep this in mind when planning our commemorative strategies or events. They should even be included in the consultation.

Mr. Thomson, do you have any comments?

Mr. Paul Thomson: Their participation is important, especially given their role in more recent conflicts. It is up to us to ensure that their contribution is commemorated.

Mr. Rick Christopher: I must mention that our department has liaison officers who are RCMP members. So that collaboration continues.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Mr. Christopher or Mr. Thompson, could you give me some concrete examples? I'm having a hard time seeing, imagining how that could be done.

Mr. Paul Thomson: First, in our consultations on the National Monument to Canada's Mission in Afghanistan, the RCMP was a key stakeholder. They participated in our consultations. As we begin to develop the commemorative content for younger veterans and for other conflicts, we need to consult with the RCMP even more. They are definitely on our radar.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you very much.

That's all, Mr. Chair.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Before we go to Rachel, I will need to suspend just briefly in order to do her sound check.

• (1625) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1630)

The Chair: We're ready to go.

Ms. Blaney, you have two and a half minutes.

Ms. Rachel Blaney (North Island—Powell River, NDP): Thank you, everyone. I apologize for missing your presentation.

I heard Mr. Casey's question and I really couldn't agree more. We're hearing and seeing a lot more interaction in community events.

I know COVID has changed it, but this past Remembrance Day we had a small event and I was absolutely amazed to see how many of our veterans came, from the Second World War and the Korean War. Some of them were very elderly, but they were still there. It was hard for our cadets to not be able to go and help them walk closer. I appreciate how these opportunities for us to remember are really challenged during this time.

At the last committee meeting, we heard from Caitlin Bailey, the executive director of the Vimy Foundation. She talked about the concern she had around overseas commemorations—that mentality of “if it's out of sight, it's out of mind”—and making sure Canada is proactive in providing sustainable funding for the maintenance of memorials.

I wonder if you could give us a bit of an update and tell us if VAC is committed to ensuring that sustainable funding is there for the maintenance and upkeep of overseas commemorations, which I know we all agree are so important for us in our international reputation.

I will leave it to you to decide who should answer.

Mr. Rick Christopher: Mr. Chair, I can start.

I absolutely agree, and as you can imagine, there are a number of challenges with having sites overseas. We have 14 sites. Two of them are national historic sites.

There are a number of organizations that we work with on a regular basis. Some of them do approach us on an ongoing basis for additional funding, whether that be for maintenance or interpretation. Some of these are ad hoc and some of them are more ongoing. For instance, if we look at the Juno Beach Centre, which is run by a non-governmental organization, we have an ongoing relationship in terms of funding for them.

For some of the others, though, such as if you're talking about the Vimy Foundation, we partner with them and provide funding, really to enhance the experience for people who are either interested in Vimy or visiting Vimy.

Maybe Paul can talk a bit about some of the ongoing projects we have with them.

Mr. Paul Thomson: Very quickly, yes, the Juno Beach Centre and Vimy Foundation are very key and important partners for us in the work we do. We are working on a policy around third parties and how to deal with that ongoing asset management issue that we have, but we are working very well with both of them.

Even on the content development side, we've done some wonderful things with the Vimy Foundation recently that they're working on in terms of exhibits and content for Vimy, and the same with the Juno Beach Centre. They're very much aligned with our strategic plan and looking for opportunities for their own respective organizations to work with that.

I know that's not part of your question, but I want to flag that the relationship is good with both of those key groups and that we are working on a third party policy to put some parameters around how that ongoing asset management issue is going to look and feel going forward.

The Chair: Thank you very much, sir.

On that note, that brings us to a close on our first hour. I thank all of you for participating today, and I will allow you to jump off the call as I introduce Mr. Clark.

Sir, the next five minutes are all yours to make your opening remarks. Go ahead.

Mr. Steven Clark (National Executive Director, The Royal Canadian Legion): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and thank you for the invitation to the Legion to appear before you today.

I am Steven Clark, national executive director. I have also served as the director of Canada's national Remembrance Day ceremony for 10 years, and have conceived and developed such initiatives as the virtual poppy drop projection on Centre Block and the virtual wall of honour and remembrance.

Commemoration of service and sacrifice is a mainstay of the Legion. Remembrance initiatives, whether they be large-scale events or quiet moments of personal reflection, all contribute to the collective reminiscence of a grateful nation.

While technological advances and societal trends and expectations have formed and transformed how we remember, the important who and why we remember remains forever constant.

From that first Armistice Day ceremony in the Commonwealth in 1919, people have continued to gather every year to pay their respects and thanks to the fallen. In 1921, 100 years ago this July, the Great War Veterans Association, the predecessor of the Royal Canadian Legion, adopted the poppy as the symbol of remembrance in Canada. Community cenotaph ceremonies and wearing the lapel poppy are important components of the visible expression of how we remember, and these will continue unabated.

As technology becomes more integrated into our lives, however, how we remember has seen an evolution, which complements but does not replace more traditional practices. In recent years, we have seen virtual ceremonies, albeit sometimes, of late, out of necessity.

In 2018, the Legion introduced the digital poppy for display on personal digital devices, social media platforms and e-communications. The highly successful tap-enabled “pay tribute” poppy boxes, trialled last year, will be expanded to 2,000 locations for the 2021 poppy campaign, and will complement the traditional method of poppy distribution and donation collection. Both the digital poppy and the pay tribute boxes provide a response to the trend of a cashless society, as these donations to support Canada’s veterans are made using a credit card or cellphone.

Innovation and a desire to bring remembrance to a younger demographic in an environment to which they are accustomed, led the Legion, in 2019, to partner with Fortnite, an online gaming platform, to develop and offer a virtual remembrance island. On that island, players experience First World War trenches, D-Day beaches, a Canadian military cemetery and the Vimy Ridge memorial. There is absolutely no fighting, and no weaponry or destruction, only the opportunity for a journey of remembrance.

In 2020, the island became a sequel and was expanded to include more Second World War locations and experiences, like the Dieppe Raid and Hill 70. Available only on November 11, players were encouraged to pause for two minutes of silence at 11 p.m., another way to connect with the gaming community on their terms. On that one day, in each of 2019 and 2020, over 15 million individuals visited remembrance island.

That connection with youth remains paramount. The Legion National Foundation’s poster and literary contest sees 100,000 students nationwide every year show what remembrance means to them, through their artistic expression and literary composition. That contest has evolved over its decades-long existence to include a video component in some locations.

Community engagement is also essential. We have seen a renewed interest by corporate Canada in sharing the remembrance message. Already, for the 2021 poppy campaign, the Legion has almost 100 corporate partners who have committed to work nationally or with their local branches to promote remembrance to their employees and customers.

That community engagement can be in various forms. For the 2020 remembrance period, the Legion engaged national landmark locations across Canada to create a visual display of remembrance

on a grand scale. Iconic places like the CN Tower, Niagara Falls, city of Ottawa and Toronto signs, the Calgary Tower, the Olympic cauldron in Vancouver, the Canada Place Sails of Light, the Vancouver Science World dome and others were illuminated in red, representing the poppy, creating yet another reminder of our pledge to never forget.

It has been said that human memory is adaptive, and that what we learn and remember is goal-oriented. Our goal is to ensure that society’s memories are tuned to remembrance and the importance of remembering our fallen.

• (1635)

We need to continue to engage Canada’s current and next generations as well as communities throughout all reaches of the country. We need to continue to develop innovative ways to weave the remembrance experience into existing behaviours while still respecting the traditions of the past, but whatever initiatives evolve, remembering the service and sacrifice of the fallen remains sacrosanct.

Mr. Chair, the Legion thanks you for the opportunity to participate in this study.

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

As the father of a 14-year-old boy, I want to say that the Remembrance Day event on Fortnite was a big hit in the May household. I know people can't see the other side of my screen, but I share this space with the rec room in my home, and my son is playing Fortnite. That's in the background of what I'm seeing right now. That was a very well-done initiative.

Moving on to questions, up next for five minutes is MP Brassard, please.

• (1640)

Mr. John Brassard (Barrie—Innisfil, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

What's Fortnite? I'm only kidding.

The Chair: I'll talk to you after, John.

Mr. John Brassard: Okay.

Steve, it's good to see you again, and thanks for coming to committee on an extremely important study, not just for now but also for the future as well.

I know we're speaking about commemoration, but one of the issues you have spoken about in front of committee is the issue of the state of the Legions across the country as a result of COVID. The emergency funding helped. I know it wasn't the exact amount that you were looking for. I'm wondering if you can briefly give me the state of the Legions across the country right now as a result of COVID, and what you're hearing on the ground from your Legions.

Mr. Steven Clark: Currently only six per cent of our branches nationwide are fully open; 77% of our branches are completely closed or are accessible only by telephone or email. The money that was made available through the VOESF was extremely helpful and much appreciated, and the third disbursement will be going out this Friday.

Mr. John Brassard: Thanks, Steve. I just wanted to get a sense from you where things were at.

I assume you've been engaged in the strategic planning process with Veterans Affairs—the 10-year strategic plan for commemoration. I'm just wondering from your standpoint about some of the things you like in what you see and some of the things that you're thinking maybe should be going in a different direction. I'd like to get your opinion on where you see the 10-year strategic plan and your assessment on it.

Mr. Steven Clark: What we have to do is continue to maintain our focus on education. Veterans Affairs has an excellent education program, engaging schools right across the country. The Legion is very happy to be part of that. I think that's where a focus really has to be maintained.

There's nothing territorial or jurisdictional about remembrance, and the fact that the Legion is one organization that's able to participate with Veterans Affairs in developing a strategic plan is very helpful. We have a great footprint across the country, almost 1,400 locations, and we need to do whatever we can collaboratively to make sure remembrance receives the focus it needs.

Mr. John Brassard: The previous panel talked about the movement, obviously because of COVID, toward virtual ceremonies. You mentioned that in your opening remarks as well. How concerned are you, once we get back to some sense of normalcy—which we all hope will be soon—about possibly maintaining a virtual presence as opposed to that in-person presence? I think the in-person presence—and I hope you'll agree with me—is far more impactful, but maybe there's an opportunity to combine the best of both worlds. We heard as well that outreach can increase as a result of that virtual presence. What are some of the things that you think might be important going forward?

Mr. Steven Clark: I think it's important that we maintain both. As I said, for over 100 years, people have gathered at cenotaphs, and the reason they do that is that it's very much a sense of community and a sense of unity, and once the pandemic restrictions ease, people will come back to those memorials, because they want to stand shoulder to shoulder with others in the community to show that they remember.

However, we also have to recognize that there are those who are just unable to go to a local ceremony or memorial, or perhaps there isn't one in their location. Because of that, we have to continue to provide an option. It can't be one way or the other; we have to do both, and that's what I see going forward. For example, the national Remembrance Day ceremony is broadcast, yes, and 4.2 million people see it on an annual basis, but we also, through the Legion, show it on our Facebook site so any of our followers will be able to see it. You have to continue to provide these opportunities.

Mr. John Brassard: On passing commemoration on to the next generation—obviously many of the older veterans are passing, un-

fortunately—tell me a bit about what the Legion is doing to engage young people in this country to commemorate and remember going forward?

Mr. Steven Clark: One of the greatest ways is through the poster and literary contests. As I noted, 100,000 young people from kindergarten through to grade 12 participate in that contest every year. It's absolutely incredible.

Another thing is that the Legion National Foundation has a biennial pilgrimage of remembrance to Europe. It's very limited in terms of the number of people who can attend, but the intent with that pilgrimage is that those who participate and experience the triumphs and tragedy of Canada's military heritage in Europe will then come back to engage youth in their communities, whether it's talking to a cadet group or to Scouts or Guides, and pass on the information they saw first-hand. We have to continue to engage individuals, especially youth, in remembrance.

• (1645)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Brassard.

Up next, we have MP Samson, please.

Mr. Darrell Samson (Sackville—Preston—Chezzetcook, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

It's nice to see you again, Steven. Thank you for your presentation. It is extremely important.

Earlier in the hour, we had the department sharing some information. Something that hit me really hard and that one should know—when you hear the numbers, it's scary—is that 94% of the people being served today are modern-day veterans. I know the World War I, World War II and Korean War veterans are dying off, but it's so hard to listen to that and to see numbers so big.

Steven, I can't say enough for the work that Legion members do, and the Legion itself does to help veterans and their families, and to help communities. They're out there all the time, supporting and finding ways.... It's as simple as helping someone fill in an application or whatnot. It's just outstanding.

One area I notice, and many Legion members will share with me, is that it's difficult to bring in more modern-day veterans to the Legion.

Maybe you could talk about that a little. The vision plan that we've brought forward talks about how we bring in Afghan veterans and recognize them. How do we bring in more recognition of women's participation, LGBTQ2 members and indigenous peoples?

What could you share with us about how we can do that? What are we doing, what are you doing, and what can we do to continue that recognition?

Mr. Steven Clark: In 2014, the Legion undertook a review that indicated that although a number of Canadians would like to participate or become members of the Legion, especially younger veterans, they felt they didn't have time. They had family responsibilities and weren't of the stage in either their career or their personal life that they would be able to commit time. However, that doesn't stop the Legion from reaching out.

When the war in Afghanistan ended in 2015, we held a welcome home campaign. Every Legion branch across the country reached out to veterans of the war in Afghanistan to welcome them to the community, to welcome them to the branch. We had, over that one-week period, 9,000 veterans from the war in Afghanistan come out to the Legion to see what the Legion could offer. If you have a need, you don't have to be a Legion member to receive the assistance that the Legion can provide.

We have to continue to engage and to do outreach to individuals, as I said, in areas that they are familiar with. We have to take remembrance to them. We have to take the message to them, to hopefully draw them in to provide the recognition and support they need.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Steven, thank you very much for that information, because 9,000 is just about 25% of the 40,000 who participated in the Afghan war, and that's major. That's really important.

I see Legions going out and trying to bring those individuals in more actively. I thank you for that work and that important celebration you brought to the table in 2015.

I hear from some Afghan veterans—March 31 marked seven years since the end of the Afghan war—that some of them still feel that the cenotaphs and the memorials don't recognize their dates and service of peace, if you want.

Are you hearing that, and what do you see as being a solution to that? I have a number of veterans who are saying they're not being recognized as they should be. What could you suggest?

Mr. Steven Clark: Yes, I'm hearing the same thing, and that should never be. We have to make sure that service is recognized, and something as simple as placing dates on a community war memorial will go a long way to showing those who served in Afghanistan that we really care what they did and want to recognize that.

As you know, those dates were added to the National War Memorial, something we've encouraged Legion branches across the country to do. If they have a Legion-owned memorial, please add those dates. If it's not a Legion-owned memorial, talk to the town or the municipality. They should be recognized; we can't forget them.

• (1650)

Mr. Darrell Samson: That's well said. Thank you very much for that, Steven.

I have one more quick question. How can we apply an Afghan veteran's lens to policy and decision-making?

The Chair: Make it a very brief answer, please.

Mr. Steven Clark: Make sure you engage them in that decision-making process.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Bravo.

The Chair: That was nice and brief. Thank you.

MP Desilets, please, you have two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Good afternoon.

The Remembrance Day ceremony is not only important as a tribute. For our veterans, it is also a great opportunity to get together, to socialize and to break their isolation. Last year, as many others did, you rightly asked to mark the occasion virtually. It was definitely a necessary evil.

You put together some great initiatives for youth, among others. I was amazed at the amount of writing you have received. It is phenomenal.

What does The Royal Canadian Legion plan to do this year if the celebrations are still virtual? How do you plan to reach out to our veterans virtually?

[*English*]

Mr. Steven Clark: We've been very fortunate that schools across the country still participated in the contest. Some of them may have been opened, and some may not, but they were still able to participate remotely. We have to make sure we continue that. Whatever means we have to undertake, we have to make sure we do that.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: I understand. I may not have been clear. This is my question.

Do you have any idea what Remembrance Day will look like next year if the ceremony is held virtually? You are so creative.

[*English*]

Mr. Steven Clark: We don't have clarity on what the situation is going to be like next year for the 2022 ceremony. However, we have a sample protocol that we can follow if it is required that we do it either entirely virtually or as a hybrid. As we get closer, we'll know better, but the big thing we can do is to let people know what it's going to look like and to communicate that information as early as possible.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now we'll move to MP Blaney for two and a half minutes, please.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Clark, for being here with us today.

Back in 2017 I was incredibly honoured to provide veteran Gordie Bannerman a replica of the monument that was built in Toronto commemorating those who fought in the Italian campaign in World War II. He was 95, and I was just incredibly happy to be with him and his family.

One of the things I learned about him was that in his eighties he learned how to type on a computer so he could work alongside some of his younger family members to get his stories on the website so people could see, hear and read his story. I know VAC has now recognized them and they are also on the VAC website. Choosing this method of course allowed younger people, including his family members, to engage with his story, and I think that's so very powerful.

I'm wondering if you could talk about the importance of keeping those stories alive in this country. I know multiple organizations are doing things. I'm wondering, from the Legion's perspective, how you are working to support saving these stories so young people will hear them in the future.

Mr. Steven Clark: It really is a living history, a first-hand account that we cannot lose. We have to take advantage of it. We have to gather these as much as possible. I know you heard last week from Caroline Dromaguet from the War Museum and about the new initiative they are getting under way, called "In Their Voices". It's absolutely tremendous.

While the Legion itself is not actively going out doing the interviews, we're supporting organizations like the War Museum and those who have these projects already under way to enable them to continue on with this important work, because this is the way you pass the torch. It's a way that an individual—a veteran who experienced things first-hand—can pass those on to the next generation.

• (1655)

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you, sir. It's just so incredibly important. I'm wondering if you could also speak very briefly, since I have so little time, about how the Legion works so closely with cadets. I know in my riding, especially around Remembrance Day, you see so many of the cadets helping, but also standing in front of local grocery stores collecting resources to help veterans. I'm so inspired by that. I'm just wondering how it works. Would you talk about how important it is to engage these groups together to keep that remembrance alive?

The Chair: Give a brief answer, please.

Mr. Steven Clark: The Legion has a terrific working relationship with the cadets. We support them as much as possible. We noticed a huge gap when we were not able to have their assistance during the poppy campaign this past year. We're going to continue to develop that relationship so that it gets even stronger.

The Chair: Thank you all.

Up next we have Mr. Davidson for five minutes, please.

Mr. Scot Davidson (York—Simcoe, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I appreciate that.

How are you, Mr. Clark? How are you doing?

Mr. Steven Clark: I'm well, Mr. Davidson, and you?

Mr. Scot Davidson: It's all good. Thanks for taking the time today. It's often said that what's remembered lives on, and I want to thank you and the Legion for all of the work you do.

I haven't been away in years. It was funny, and maybe Darrell will listen to this point. Canadians love to be inspired. The last time I was away I was sitting at the airport with my nephew and saw the Disney airplane, and he said to his dad, "Look at that. It's unbelievable." We came back, and we had to get back to Orillia to see the CP Christmas train that was rolling through town.

I pick up on your comments, and the Legion is so good at the banner program and involving the private sector. I wondered if you have ever thought about teaming up with CP or CN, or asking Veterans Affairs to do some rail cars with veterans, or reaching out to Air Canada to do a couple of veterans' aircraft in celebration of that. Maybe you could speak to the private sector involvement quickly.

Mr. Steven Clark: Absolutely. It's interesting you should mention that. Back in 2006 the Legion in fact did have a partnership with Air Canada, where they placed a poppy decal on a number of their aircraft. The problem that we ran into was making sure that a decal could stay affixed to the aircraft skin when it was passing through the air at high speeds. It wasn't on the tail; it was actually at the door, so every person going on board that plane was able to see the poppy. We've done the same thing with VIA Rail for the last three or four years, where we have poppies on train cars and we have poppies available for distribution to any passenger who will be on that train car.

Mr. Scot Davidson: Instead of "I love Mickey Mouse", I would love to see the tail of a 737 WestJet lit up, or the Christmas train that has lights on the CP train. That's just an idea.

Secondly, we did so well at the Legions in York—Simcoe, in my riding, with bottle drives. I don't want to say we drink too much in York—Simcoe, but I think we would have won the contest.

Mr. Clark, I've had a couple of Legions reach out to me. They were very thankful for the funding they got, but they're reaching out now and saying, "Scot, if this COVID continues, it's just not enough."

I just wondered if you could speak quickly to just how much some Legions that you know of.... Even though we had the funding, if this continues and they miss another year, how detrimental is that going to be to some of our Legions?

Mr. Steven Clark: Absolutely. It will be. When we first applied the VOESF last year, we were looking at covering expenses for about an eight-month period. These closures have extended well beyond that—another five or six months. Now, there are as of Friday of this week another 884 Legions that will be receiving additional funding. That will help, and Legions are incredibly resilient and innovative in coming up with ideas to maintain their operations, but it is increasingly difficult. We have to look at other ways.

Last year the Legion's Dominion Command made available \$3 million of its own reserves. In May of this year we'll be providing some more of that funding out to those branches that are really in need. We have to recognize that if we don't have Legion branches and members, then our entire organization will suffer. We have to avoid that.

• (1700)

Mr. Scot Davidson: I appreciate those comments.

I know on this committee we'll all be pulling, for sure, all the time for Legion.

Third, I would ask you, in the Legion's outreach to Veterans Affairs Canada, are there any suggestions that maybe that relationship isn't working for the Legion in the way it should, or that it's working well? Do you have any suggestions on the relationship you have with Veterans Affairs Canada?

Mr. Steven Clark: We have a very positive and open relationship with Veterans Affairs. We haven't gone down the route, except for this past year, of requesting any kind of government funding through the department, because we want to maintain that impartiality and that separation. This was an extraordinary year, so we had to make that extraordinary choice.

Going forward, we won't be looking for funding, hopefully, but we will maintain a great positive working relationship because we are all collaborating on the same goals.

Mr. Scot Davidson: We are always collaborating on the same goals, and if we have to do more bottle drives, I know small towns like my community will always pull together for the Legion.

Thank you, Mr. Clark. I appreciate that.

Mr. Steven Clark: It's my pleasure.

The Chair: Thank you, MP Davidson.

Up next we have MP Amos, for five minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Mr. William Amos (Pontiac, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My thanks to the witnesses.

I have two questions.

The first one is related to the service of our Canadian military. I'm thinking of recent events in my riding of Pontiac. On two occasions, in 2017 and 2019, they provided major services to us during the floods. It was a little surprising to see tanks on highway 148, but that was the reality. I am sure the communities in the Pontiac, which I represent, would want to find a way to commemorate those moments and, in particular, the services rendered by the Canadian Armed Forces during the floods.

Has the desire to celebrate Canada's efforts in times of crisis and natural disaster been expressed during your consultations on commemorations?

[*English*]

Mr. Steven Clark: There hasn't been anything on a national scale, but a number of branches locally recognize those members of the military community who have provided assistance or extraordinary assistance. That's something we encourage our branches to do.

Interestingly, our branches are autonomous, so although Dominion Command provides policy and procedure direction, we don't actually direct the branches. We can certainly encourage and recommend, but it's up to the individual branches what they want to do. Something like this is absolutely essential to recognize what the community is doing for everyone else in the community. It's one of the three pillars of our mission.

Mr. William Amos: Okay, Mr. Clark, so there is openness to that, and an interest and an appetite. It's a question, then, of finding the proper mechanism and engaging the community to help bring that alive.

Mr. Steven Clark: Absolutely. How will the branch provide that proper recognition, or the recognition to those individuals and organizations?

Both the provincial level and the national level can provide assistance and guidance and recommendations, and it's something that is so important to do because the Legion serves the community and there are others who are serving the community; we need to recognize that.

Mr. William Amos: Thank you for that response.

My second question is off in a bit of a different direction, but you'll understand that the riding of Pontiac is home to many hundreds of creators and artists—people who create culture for a living. It's an important part of our region's economy.

I wonder the extent to which you feel it's important to engage with Canada's creative community in delivering commemoration and in reconceiving commemoration? This is a question I'm going to want to pose to our public servants as well, but I think it's worthwhile engaging at the level of the Legion, if only to know what kinds of interactions you've had in the past with distinct sectors of Canada's creative community, the arts community, in the reconceiving of commemoration.

• (1705)

Mr. Steven Clark: Absolutely. It is so important that we engage every community, and here I'm talking about groups of people as opposed to a municipality, in what the Legion does in remembrance.

We have engaged probably about 10 different aboriginal artisans who are involved in making poppies for our distribution, whether they be sealskin or sweetgrass or beaded. This is an absolutely wonderful way in which we can expand the remembrance message and draw in those artisans. Similarly, we have reached out to artisans who are very skilled at doing things with metalwork so that we can engage them as well in sharing the importance of the remembrance message and also promote that community.

There is a theatre company that we have been in discussion with on *Projet Monarques*. They are going across the country doing workshops with individuals who have been affected by PTSD or an OSI. They are gathering their thoughts and words and they will be putting them into a theatrical production.

These are simply examples of other ways in which we can reach as many people as possible by, again, weaving into those existing behaviours.

The Chair: Thank you very much, sir.

Up next is MP Doherty for five minutes.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Clark, for your testimony.

As our chair was smiling and talking about Fortnite, I was texting my son. He's in the game design business, and so are his friends. I was asking if they developed that or if they took part in that, because one of his friends actually worked on Fortnite, so I was very proud, actually, as you were mentioning that. I did not know that about it, although I know that a ton of work goes on in terms of remembrance.

In my short period of time here, I want to speak about a couple of things. I am a grandson of two World War II veterans. Neither of them spoke of their service, because it was too traumatic. Only a handful of years ago, almost 15 years after he passed, I learned of one grandfather's participation in the "devil's brigade". He was one of the very first special forces members and taught small-arms combat.

Mr. Clark, the work you do is so important. Was the Legion included in any funding in this most recent budget?

Mr. Steven Clark: The Legion itself was not, but we were very pleased with the funding of other initiatives, such as additional funding for mental health, for military sexual trauma and for a number of initiatives to combat veterans' homelessness. It won't assist the individual Legion branch itself, but it very much assists with the work the Legion does.

Mr. Todd Doherty: I appreciate that. That is exactly the road I was going down. As you may know, I am a tireless champion in terms of mental health and those who serve our country and our communities.

There is a program that the Legion has—the Veterans Transition Network—whereby you work tirelessly to support those who are struggling silently and suffering silently. I'm wondering if there is an opportunity for the Legion to apply for further funding for that program. As you said earlier, only 6% are open currently, and 77% of your doors are closed. That is a tremendous void in our network,

because the Legion serves just so many people and provides those services.

I would like your comments on that.

Mr. Steven Clark: We have not as an organization applied for funding for that specific purpose. Early on, at the outset of the Veterans Transition Network, we were very supportive financially. We donated half a million dollars to get that program under way, because we recognized the value in it. Since then, our British Columbia/Yukon command has donated another million dollars to that program. This comes from poppy funds.

We have not gone out as an organization to solicit additional funds, but we provide support and endorsement of these programs whenever asked by those specific entities.

• (1710)

Mr. Todd Doherty: Mr. Clark, are you familiar with the movement to bring "988", a simple, three-digit national suicide prevention hotline number, to Canada?

Mr. Steven Clark: I'm sorry. I am not aware.

Mr. Todd Doherty: It's very similar to 911 or 411: a simple, three-digit number, but geared around removing that barrier when those who are struggling actually want to reach out.

Do you feel that removing any barrier to mental health is important, and is 988 is something you believe would be beneficial?

Mr. Steven Clark: Absolutely. We have to remove that stigma.

Three years ago, in 2018, the Legion named Mrs. Anita Cenerini as the National Silver Cross Mother. She was the mother of Private Thomas Welch, the first soldier from Afghanistan to die by suicide. We have to bring this discussion out to open conversation, and this is one way we can do it. There are others, and 988 would be a tremendous step forward.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Mr. Clark, I thank you and the 248,000 members of our Legion, all your volunteers, who do 600,000 hours or more, millions of hours, of service every year. I'm a member of branch 43 here in Prince George. We have branch 139 and branch 94 also in my region, and I can't say enough how appreciative I am of the work that you do and of the veterans in our region as well.

Mr. Steven Clark: Many thanks to you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Up next for five minutes is MP Fillmore, please.

Mr. Andy Fillmore (Halifax, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Mr. Clark, thank you so much. As the sole witness for an hour, with 12 MPs firing rapid questions at you, you're doing remarkably well. Thank you for your lucidity, and moreover, for your incredible work.

At one point in your testimony you raised the alarm that if we don't have Legions and branches, where are we?

I see the work of the Legions in Halifax: the Spryfield Legion, the Vimy Legion and the White Ensign Legion. The Vimy Legion provides the colour guard for our main Remembrance Day events. The Spryfield Legion has become a living room for the community there. The programs that support veterans are so important, with the extended family and all the benefits that brings. However, the Legions also facilitate remembrance, don't they? They carry the stories forward, whether it's in an oral tradition or with the stories of what's on the wall of the Legions, or whether it is turning up to be the colour guard at important events.

We're seeing the membership numbers fall. I'm thinking particularly of the White Ensign Legion. They were trying everything, having barbeque nights and bringing in different kinds of music, trying to recruit younger members to keep the good work going. They were having a very difficult time with that. That's not my real question.

If you have any secrets for us on how we can increase youth membership in our local Legions, I would love to hear that from you, or how we can help, if there was a program that VAC could undertake that could help in some way.

If you have an answer to that, that's great, but I really want to talk to you about physical memorials. For example, at the Spryfield Legion, there is a granite memorial. I don't know the story of who paid for it or how it's maintained, but there are a number of memorials around Halifax, as there are in towns and cities across the country, that have cropped up organically.

Famously, in Halifax, as I mentioned at our last meeting of the committee, there is the HMCS *Bonaventure* anchor. A very plucky crew of survivors of the HMCS *Kootenay* disaster had it renovated for the 75th anniversary of *Kootenay*, but it was very unclear about whose responsibility it was and who had to pay for it. In the end, it all worked out, but it wasn't clear.

I wonder whether there is any insight you might give us on how we can better care for those smaller memorials. The glamorous ones are in the news on Remembrance Day, but I'm asking about those smaller community monuments.

Thank you.

• (1715)

Mr. Steven Clark: I know that a number of years ago there was a national repository of memorials across the country that was gathering pictures and information so that people would know where they were and who was maintaining them or had the responsibility for it. I do not know the state of play for that repository, or whether it is still valid or updated.

With regard to community memorials, they could be Legion owned or non-Legion owned, but regardless of whether they are or not, if there is a local Legion branch, they are able to financially support the maintenance of those memorials should they fall into a state of disrepair or need things done. It's very important that we do that, so whether or not there's ownership, the Legion stands ready to assist if required.

Perhaps I could just quickly go back to your original comment about how you draw younger people in. It's a challenge. I look at the innovative ways in which some branches have done this.

For example, the Legion branch from Fredericton turned one of their meeting rooms into a gaming centre. They filled it with Xboxes and large-screen TVs, and being a community close to CFB Gagetown, it drew in those individuals, so they were able to learn what the Legion can do for them. Whether they are Legion members or not doesn't really matter, as long as they know that the Legion is there when they do need the Legion.

Mr. Andy Fillmore: Thank you, Mr. Clark.

I will let it go there and pass my remaining time forward.

The Chair: Excellent. Thank you.

Next, we have MP Desilets for two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

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

Mr. Clark, what you are telling us is really fascinating.

I would like some clarification. The government injected \$14 million into the veterans organizations emergency support fund.

In your opinion, was that enough money? Did it meet the demand?

[*English*]

Mr. Steven Clark: No, the Legion had sought \$30 million. Fourteen million dollars is a substantial sum and we will certainly do what we can with it, but it was not to the level we were hoping.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: In that case, could you enlighten me?

There is never enough money. I understand you and I know that the needs are great.

There are two Legion branches in my riding. They are both suffering and continue to suffer even though they have received small amounts of money from that investment. The needs are there and you were hoping to receive more money.

So can you explain why you said that you would not seek more investments?

[*English*]

Mr. Steven Clark: Absolutely. Once we finish this third and final disbursement of the original \$14 million, we will do a triage of our branches to find out what their financial state is. So far, we have only determined which ones are open and which are closed. We need to find out the financial viability of these branches before we develop our plans for moving forward.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: From your understanding of the situation, about how many Legion branches are in extreme danger? By that I mean branches that are closed or about to be closed.

[English]

Mr. Steven Clark: We had the viability—not the financial but the viability—of our branches assessed just recently. Of almost 1,400 branches, 661 were in high need of more financial assistance, so we are focusing on those 661 branches.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you very much, Mr. Clark.

I have no more questions, Mr. Chair.

[English]

The Chair: Excellent. Thank you very much.

Up next, we have MP Blaney for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I also want to acknowledge that you have had to answer questions for one whole hour. I really appreciate that.

I represent, of course, 11 Legions in my riding. A lot of them are in very small communities, and they are all astonishing in the support they provide and the work they do in those communities. They are an essential part of the community—often the heartbeat.

I'm just wondering if you could share a bit. I'm curious about whether the Legion has an opportunity to share best practices around how it organizes different forms of remembrance. I know capacity can sometimes be a challenge. Some of our Legions are fierce but aging. I'm just curious about how we can support them as they go through these really important and sometimes frightening transitions, like COVID.

I know you guys are doing your best to keep everybody's energy up and to keep them hopeful. You're dealing with limited resources to help keep them stable, because we definitely want them here. Could you just speak to how you share best practices around things that are working in terms of remembrance?

• (1720)

Mr. Steven Clark: That is so important. In advance of last year's remembrance period, we asked all of our provincial commands to gather information from their branches about what they were doing and how they were remembering. We put all that information on our website. We shared it through what's called an "all-branch email communication", so that we all knew what everybody was doing.

There are so many good ideas, and we need to share them. Nobody wants to keep them close to their chest. They want to share what they are doing. This is a great opportunity to do that.

We've also reached out to our fraternal international partners, the Royal British Legion and the Royal New Zealand Returned and Services Association, to find out exactly what they are doing. We can share organizationally what others are doing when faced with a similar situation. We can give branches ideas.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I appreciate that, and that was my last question. I would like to say, though, that I very much appreciated how quickly the Legion responded to get us some beautiful masks. I was so proud to be able to purchase a bunch of them, to hand them out to people and to make sure we remembered. Thank you for responding to COVID so quickly.

Thank you.

Mr. Steven Clark: It was our pleasure.

The Chair: Thank you very much, MP Blaney.

I was hoping to stop there. Unless anybody has any objections, I have a few committee business things to go over. We do have a few minutes, though.

I have MP Wagantall next on the list. Do you have a quick question?

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: No. I'm fine.

I just want to say that I come from a rural riding with a gazillion Legions, and I've told them they're going to have to vote me in for years and years to come so that I can get to every one of those Remembrance Day services, because they're just so precious.

Thank you for what you do, Steven. I appreciate it.

Mr. Steven Clark: Thank you.

The Chair: That's a good sentiment to end on.

I want to thank you, Mr. Clark. That was definitely yeoman's work to get through that whole hour by yourself.

I represent the riding of Cambridge, the home of the great painter, David Sopha, and the portraits of honour. I'm sure you've had an opportunity to meet him and see his work. He of course is struggling right now, as he's fighting stage 4 cancer, but if there's any way to include him in your conversations about Remembrance Day events this coming Remembrance Day, I'd be happy to have that conversation.

I thank my colleagues for their indulgence there.

Thank you very much, Mr. Clark, for being with us.

For the committee, I have two quick items before we are dismissed.

We have a proposed budget in the amount of \$2,500 for our next study on service dogs for veterans. Are we good to adopt that budget? Are there any objections?

There are no objections.

Also, speaking of that, we need to set up a deadline for witnesses. What I'm suggesting is that it be no later than Thursday, May 6, at 4 p.m., which is this Thursday. Is that enough time for folks to get their witnesses in? We can move that a bit, but we have to move to get those witnesses ready to go. Are there any objections to the May 6 proposal?

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Mr. Chair, I don't think so, but I'm not 100% sure. I'm wondering if we could put it on the Friday. It would make a big difference for us.

The Chair: Mr. Clerk, is there a reason we can't do it on Friday?

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Benoit Jolicoeur): Friday should be fine.

The Chair: Excellent. Thank you very much, everybody. It was a great meeting.

If you've noticed, I have a new standing desk and this is my first meeting not sitting throughout the meeting. I will be sitting shortly.

Thank you very much, everybody, and thanks to all the folks in Ottawa who allowed us to be heard during today's meeting.

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