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Chair

Mr. Rob Anders

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• (1105)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Rob Anders (Calgary West, CPC)): Ladies and gentlemen, I know we have some other people on their way. Welcome yet again to another meeting of the veterans affairs standing committee.

Today we have a very special guest and witness with us. We've all put a lot of time into laying out the groundwork for the creation of the position of ombudsman; now we have with us the first ombudsman, Colonel Patrick B. Stogran.

The orders of the day are that pursuant to Standing Orders 110 and 111, we will discuss the order in council appointment of Colonel Patrick B. Stogran to the position of veterans ombudsman, referred to the committee on Tuesday, November 13, 2007.

Sir, I don't know if you've been told 10 or 20 minutes. It's 10 minutes as you see fit. You are front and centre today. After that, we have a predetermined order for a chance to ask you questions.

Sir, the floor is yours.

Colonel Patrick Stogran (Veterans Ombudsman): Mr. Chairman, may I start off by expressing my sincere appreciation to the committee for the invitation to appear here today.

It's been two short weeks since I took my release from the Canadian Forces and laid a wreath at the National War Memorial on Remembrance Day, which was my first official duty as Canada's first veterans ombudsman.

I can't deny that it was hard for me to leave the Canadian Forces. I feel I still had a great deal to offer, but the type of employment I was looking forward to in this job I think has the potential for me to put as much passion into as I did into the profession of arms. Also, I very much look forward not only to improving the lives and well-being of the veterans of past conflicts, but also to smoothing the way ahead for those who continue to perpetuate that legacy overseas.

[Translation]

At this point in time, I am hardly in a position to speak to any degree of detail about the plight of our veterans, the trials and tribulations that they face or what I intend to do about them. Suffice to say that the situation is very, very complex and with so many potential windmills to tilt at, I find that it is most prudent to keep my powder dry for the time being.

Notwithstanding, with the research that I did leading up to taking up the appointment and the flurry of meetings and consultations I have embarked on since, I feel confident that my philosophy vis-à-

vis the way I will approach this challenge is fairly mature and will accurately reflect how I will do business.

My intention, therefore, is to introduce myself and this philosophy to committee members.

[English]

I come from a culture that places its priorities in terms of mission, buddy, self—in that order. During my military career I never strayed from that principle, and I was known to speak out when I believed the conventional wisdom of the day would compromise our army's ability to perform its mission or would not be in the best interests of our soldiers. Principled stances are not always the best career moves one can make, but I'm proud to be able to boast that I never let career imperatives stand in the way of my commitment to my profession.

I might add that I'm also proud that I can boast that our recent history in Afghanistan has proven the correctness of my past assertions.

This committee, and more importantly our veterans, can rest assured that I will carry that ethos of mission, buddy, self with me into the office of the veterans ombudsman. As the veterans ombudsman, I see myself as the champion of their cause. As testament to this, I've spent the first two weeks of my tenure reaching out to and visiting with as many veterans and veterans associations as I could. Consultation will be one of the hallmarks of my tenure as ombudsman. It is very important that I develop and maintain a deep empathy towards the veterans and remain abreast of the issues that cause them difficulty.

Independence will be the other hallmark, and one that I will vigorously protect. This is critically important if I hope to prevent political or bureaucratic convenience from ever tainting my objectivity or standing in the way of the fair treatment of our veterans.

I hasten to add that Veterans Affairs has been proactive in setting up the office of the veterans ombudsman. A skeleton project staff has been working for some months studying the DND ombudsman, drafting organizational charts and job descriptions, establishing infrastructure, and even receiving and logging complaints from clients; to date, we've received over 100.

We've hired some term employees to kick-start the intake and investigation processes, and we are currently reviewing the cases we've received to date with a view to identifying where we can make some short-term successes. I'm optimistic that we will be at what I would call an intermediate operating capability by spring and that we will be fully operational by the fall of next year, in 2008.

My personal priority in the coming weeks will be to hire a director general of operations who is a master of the mechanics of government and who can make things happen without letting us become overly bureaucratic ourselves. Indeed, timeliness or the lack thereof seems to be a recurring theme in the criticisms levelled against Veterans Affairs, so I will endeavour to make a rapid decision-action cycle a high priority for this office.

Finally, a fundamental principle that I want to follow as we design and implement the processes and structures for the office will be to make and maintain a personal relationship with people who avail themselves of our services.

It's been suggested that without legislation to back up the position of veterans ombudsman, the position will lack the teeth necessary to have a significant impact on the problems that affect the lives of our veterans. I submit that it remains to be seen.

On one hand, I can understand how legislation might make the job easier, but I could foresee how legislation might be as much a constraint as a freedom. In my experience, it could be argued that other ombudsmen have had tremendous impact within their domains despite the frustrations they may have experienced due to the lack of legislation. I might add that I am certainly not averse to taking on such challenges and arguing in favour of legislation if the need arises.

I think any government would be hard-pressed to ignore any suggestion I might make to enhance the lives of those who have served our country, even suggestions made to improve the efficacy of the office of the veterans ombudsman, because today the majority of Canadians share much compassion and empathy for the plight of our veterans. I also think it would be much easier for me to identify accurately what the letter of such legislation should be and to have it adopted after I have some experience under my belt.

• (1110)

[Translation]

It has been suggested that without the legislation to back it up the Veterans Ombudsman will lack the teeth necessary to have a significant impact on the problems that affect the lives of our veterans. I submit that this remains to be seen. On one hand I can understand that legislation might make the job of the Office easier, but I could foresee where legislation might be as much a constraint as it is a freedom. However, if I see that an absence of legislation is a significant handicap for me, I won't hesitate to say so as clearly as possible.

Another criticism of the mandate has been that the Veterans Ombudsman will not intercede in case reviews and appeals. To the contrary, however, I am quite pleased to see that I will operate outside the review and appeal process. Indeed, if there might be systemic problems inherent in the current adjudicative process, I would argue that introducing yet another player or level would be more bureaucratic smoke-and-mirrors that puts a Band-Aid on the symptoms of a problem rather than addressing the root cause. The mandate of the Office of the Veterans Ombudsman includes addressing systemic problems and emerging issues which I think gives me plenty of scope to make the current review and appeals process function more effectively if need be.

• (1115)

[English]

In closing, I wish to reaffirm the pledge I made when it was announced that I would take up the appointment of veterans ombudsman: it's all about the veterans; their cause is my commitment.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We already have a list of questioners who are chomping at the bit, I am sure. First we will go over to the Liberals, the official opposition. Go ahead, Mr. St. Denis, for seven minutes.

Mr. Brent St. Denis (Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapusksing, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much, Colonel, for being here.

Thank you for taking on this very important job. There may be questions around how it's organized, how it's structured, the relationship, and what not, but that said, there will be nothing but best wishes for you from all quarters as you begin a very important mandate.

I was pleased to hear in your comments that should you feel, as you get some experience in the role as veterans ombudsman, that legislation to back you up would be necessary, you won't be shy to speak up. That is encouraging.

I wish the best of luck to you. You will certainly have a lot of support as you move forward.

Otherwise, the thing that stood out most in your comments was your interest in a rapid decision-action cycle. The witnesses we had at our Tuesday meeting—whose testimony may be forwarded to you, depending on a motion that we will deal with at some point in time—was a case study in the opposite, in the lack of timeliness. It was a nine-year journey for a serviceman, now out of the service, and his wife. He suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder.

From my very limited involvement with the military, I do know that decisions within the military structure can be made quickly and decisively and that action can be brought to bear on a particular circumstance quickly. That is part of the culture of the military.

If there is one overriding theme for our veterans, it's red tape. Coupled with that is lack of timeliness. If it is not too early in your new role, could you talk a bit about the importance of that to you? Could you expand on your comment here?

Col Patrick Stogran: Mr. Chair, as I pointed out in my opening comments, a recurring theme that has become blatantly apparent to me is the lack of timeliness. Indeed, I would submit that the stories I've heard of our veterans of war services who have received their entitlements just shortly before their demise are nothing short of tragic.

Indeed, in this day and age, personnel who have come back off so-called peacekeeping operations suffering from post-traumatic stress were probably not treated with the sense of urgency that I would think the situation warranted. I would submit that we viewed past operations, post-Korea and pre-Afghanistan, as being something that was “out of sight, out of mind”.

Indeed, it's been suggested that we shouldn't be sending soldiers overseas unless there is a peace to keep. I would submit that, conversely, we don't send soldiers overseas unless there's a war. I submit that our soldiers—it doesn't matter where we've sent them in the world—have been submitted to situations that were every bit as severe as the individual occurrences during the great wars and Korea, so it's indeed a travesty that we have not been treating their concerns as quickly as possible.

I must say that throughout my career I've always challenged bureaucracy. I've challenged bureaucrats in and out of uniform throughout my career, and I think my record stands for itself in Afghanistan. We made it happen. Our battalion was slated to be withdrawn from the order of battle, so consequently it was shortchanged in all of the resources, money included; yet when we were called upon to deploy to Afghanistan, we were in a position to pull certain strings and make things happen in short order. Suffice it to say that I'm the kind of person who likes to cut through bureaucracy.

Having said that, I've encountered huge amounts of bureaucracy just stepping into this job. I would submit that things are in discussion now that might severely constrain me at the office.

All that is to say that I stayed in the army for 31 years because I enjoy a fight. I joined the office of the ombudsman because I deeply believe that they have entitlements, and I have a sense of giving back. All I can say at this point in time is that the government has displayed a lot of moral courage in appointing me to the position, because I intend to take on those impediments to swift closure of cases with a vengeance.

• (1120)

Mr. Brent St. Denis: May I have another moment, Mr. Chair?

I recognize that you've just taken up your post in the last couple of weeks—although I understand you've been studying and preparing for quite some time, since you were first asked to take on the job—but is there anything in the mandate, either as the mandate was publicly declared when you took office or in the background to the mandate, that you could share with us as a cause for concern?

You suggest here that the inability of the ombudsman to intercede in case reviews and appeals is a good thing. I would agree with you, certainly, on that point, although I would be hopeful that you could, for example, look at the appeals and review process, writ large, and as ombudsman comment on the process, if not on individual cases. Are there any limitations that you foresee in your mandate now, or is it too soon to say? Also, are you allowed to comment on the appeals and review process, writ large?

Col Patrick Stogran: Mr. Chair, it's indeed too soon for me to state categorically whether or not the mandate is too loosely written or not something that I'll be able to work with. However, in my opinion, I've always been the kind of person for whom the absence

of direction is an opportunity, not a constraint. I think, in the first instance, there is the potential, in the way the mandate is written, for me to actually value-add to the position and turn it into something bigger than what the veteran community and indeed Canadians are expecting.

Conversely, as I said in my opening statement, if—and I must stress “if”—there's a problem with the veterans review and appeal process, I think it would be wrong. In fact, it would amount to bureaucratic smoke and mirrors to simply inject another level of bureaucracy to address decisions and get involved in the process. Indeed, I think it's far more constructive to have a source that can, on behalf of the veterans, troubleshoot the system and make recommendations.

With the mandate worded such that the office is to investigate systemic problems as well as emerging issues—that would suggest to me that I can go looking for smoke and not wait for fire—we can have a significant impact on any stage of the review and appeal process where it's being constrained by what I would say is bureaucratic imperatives.

Suffice to say that we're not allowed, by law, to get involved in reviewing decisions. Certainly I've met members who are involved in the decision-making process and I get the impression they are genuine. So if the system supports them, then I think the ombudsman will be in a position to enhance that process for the veterans.

Mr. Brent St. Denis: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we're going over to the Bloc Québécois.

Monsieur Perron, for seven minutes.

[Translation]

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron (Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, BQ): Good morning, sir.

I don't know what to call you this morning. Should I call you colonel, sir or special advisor? I won't call you ombudsman yet.

You're no doubt aware of the fact that this committee, of which I am a proud member, has worked very hard to prepare a report on the office you now occupy. It was a unanimous report that my friends on the other side of the table supported. In that report, we mentioned that the very great majority of ombudsmen, including the ombudsman of Ontario, André Marin, and those who did not come and testify but about whom I was able to read information, were appointed under an act of Parliament. Those ombudsmen report to Parliament, unlike you, because, pursuant to paragraph 127.1(1)(c) of the Public Service Employment Act, you were appointed as the minister's special advisor. If we don't go any further into your appointment... Your staff reports to the department.

May I conclude—and I'd like to have your comments on this point—that you are the political representative and that you are also a member of the staff reporting to the deputy minister of Foreign Affairs? With all this ambiguity, how can one simultaneously serve the minister, veterans and the department? That's the problem that you will have to solve over the next three years, because I believe you've been appointed for three years, if I correctly understood the information. Over the next three years, I hope you'll be able to pay special attention to veterans.

I would like to hear your comments.

• (1125)

Col Patrick Stogran: Mr. Chair, I'm going to try to answer in French. I've already obtained the level required by the public service, but I have never had the opportunity to work in French. That will be one of my priorities in the next few years.

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: You may answer in English, sir.

Col Patrick Stogran: If you don't understand my answer, I can finish it in English.

You asked me whether I was a political representative. That is not the case. My mandate will be in effect for only three years. If the government does not give me the opportunity to remain in the position, that will mean to me that I have succeeded. As I said at the outset, it's all about veterans. I have worked for soldiers throughout my career, and today veterans are my soldiers. As a commander and officer of the Canadian Forces, I'm going to work for them.

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: Have you finished?

Col Patrick Stogran: If my answer is satisfactory, yes.

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: All right. I'm enormously concerned by another matter. The case of André Marin, a former ombudsman of the Department of National Defence, set a precedent in the Canadian government. Mr. Marin issued a somewhat harsh report on National Defence, and his contract was not renewed. The same danger awaits you. The comments I'm making are not a criticism of you: their sole purpose is to warn you of these dangers.

You have been appointed special advisor to the minister, which is a political office. So you are a political employee. How can you live with the idea that you're going to have to issue a report and, before it becomes public, have it approved by the minister before you submit it? How will you be able to prepare a report expressing the essence of your thinking?

Col Patrick Stogran: Mr. Chairman, I know that the minister has an obligation to submit the reports I prepare to Parliament. It is up to me to determine what will improve the lives and welfare of veterans. The minister will not have an opportunity to change what I believe. As I have already said, my mandate is only for three years. I am an officer of the Canadian Forces, and the duties I am talking about here are a second career. In fact, I would not want to become a public servant. I had the opportunity to enter the public service or to accept a business position in industry, but I decided to become Veterans Ombudsman. My sole purpose is to improve veterans' lives.

• (1130)

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: Thank you for your presentation. I nevertheless want to tell you that you have a considerable job ahead of you.

[English]

The Chair: He didn't have any minutes left, and he's already over, but he does that all the time. You'll get used to that around here.

Now we'll go over to Mr. Stoffer, with the New Democratic Party, for five minutes.

Mr. Peter Stoffer (Sackville—Eastern Shore, NDP): First of all, Colonel Stogran, I welcome you to your position and to the committee. On behalf of the committee, I also want to thank you for your 31 years of service to your country while in uniform. I read and heard a lot about you in the news at the beginning of the Afghan situation. I want to compliment you for your service.

I wish you good luck in your new role as well. You're going to need some luck in this particular regard. You talked about bureaucracy. You're about to enter what I think is one of the most bureaucratic jungles we have, the Veterans Review and Appeal Board.

I have a couple of questions for you. Have you had a chance to review our ombudsman report that we did in February of 2007, which came from the committee? That's this one right here.

Col Patrick Stogran: *A Helping Hand for Veterans?* Yes, sir.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: You'll notice that one of the things we talk about quite prominently is the need for veterans and their families to have an ombudsman. In your report—and I'm sure this must have been a slip—you don't say the word “families” at all. The reason I say that is if a veteran dies and his spouse is left behind, who could she then turn to? Our thinking, of course, was that the spouse or the child of a veteran should be able to turn to an ombudsman as well, in order to seek assistance.

Is it part of your mandate to not only help the veterans but their spouses and children as well?

Col Patrick Stogran: Mr. Chair, when I say “veterans”, I mean the member as well as the family.

I was in Bosnia during the gunslinging days of 1993, where we were sending peacekeepers over to be witnesses or hostages to the situation. At that time, when this was considered to be a bloodless offering in the name of peace, the families of the soldiers, sailors, and air force personnel who were sent over there were left at home to suffer all the fears and anxieties and apprehensions that our nation is today with the situation in Afghanistan. I know that only too well.

I might add that despite the notoriety I gained from my deployment to Afghanistan as the first combat mission since the Korean War, the situation I faced in Bosnia as an unarmed military observer was far more dangerous to my well-being and almost as well publicized. My wife had far less access to the things we've put in place from the lessons we learned over those years. When I came back from Afghanistan, being away from home for a very long time, one of the most profound realizations I recognized was the trauma that families experience. Indeed, they can experience the full array of occupational stress injuries that soldiers can experience overseas. I might even say that they're more susceptible to it because they're in less of a position to do anything about it.

I must apologize to the committee for my omission of the word "families". They are certainly first and foremost in my mind. The personnel who serve overseas are a unit. It's them, as well as the strong families who stay behind. We must not only support them during the deployments, but certainly also in the aftermath of the duties that our soldiers, sailors, and air force personnel have in serving overseas.

• (1135)

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Thank you.

So briefly then, if I was the spouse of a deceased veteran, would I be able to contact your office if I feel I have a grievance against the Department of Veterans Affairs?

Col Patrick Stogran: Mr. Chairman, as I mentioned in my opening statement, the idea of putting a personal face on the office of the ombudsman means we're going to endeavour to make the office of the ombudsman the go-to place for anything to do with Veterans Affairs. Indeed my approach to business is going to be much the same as when I was a commander. My place is with the veterans, to reach out to the community, while my director general of operations runs the office at home. I hope that through that outreach everybody who has anything to do with the lives and well-being of our veterans will feel free to come forth.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Sir, in our recommendations we have advised that an advisory committee should be set up to assist you. Have you had a chance to have that committee set up? If you have, is there a list of the names of people who are on there, and is that public? If not, when would you think this committee may be struck to assist you in your day-to-day work?

Col Patrick Stogran: Mr. Chair, the committee has not been set up. I've spent a lot of time in the last couple of weeks consulting with individuals, as well as veteran organizations. I have come up with a concept of operations for the advisory committee, and I can say that it reflects very closely the recommendation in the report by this committee. I'm going to reflect all generations of peacekeepers on it, as well as other professions, and make it inclusive.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Thank you very much, sir.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Stoffer, and Mr. Ombudsman.

Now we're over to Mrs. Hinton, with the Conservative Party, for seven minutes.

Mrs. Betty Hinton (Kamloops—Thompson—Cariboo, CPC): Good morning, Mr. Ombudsman. It's truly a pleasure to have you here today. I personally like straight talk, and we're certainly getting

that from you today. Having listened to you this morning, I also recognize that you are very well grounded. I find that refreshing.

I would like to reiterate that you have an ally in me, as to your priorities, and your priorities are veterans. I am a cheerleader for veterans, not a cheerleader for the department. Although I think the department does a very good job, I've been saying for years that there is room for improvement. I am looking forward to the improvements you're going to make.

I would like to take a minute to do this. There was a comment made at the last meeting regarding the definition of a veteran by my friend Mr. Perron. I want to read into the record what a veteran actually is:

The term "Veteran" includes traditional war service Veterans - those who served in the First World War, the Second World War, and the Korean War - as well as those former members of the Canadian Forces who have completed basic training with the Department of National Defence and have been released from the Forces with an honourable discharge.

These requirements apply equally to those CF members who have served in the Reserves, Special Duty Areas and on domestic duty. This recognizes the potential risk that all CF members are exposed to when they swear the Oath of Allegiance and don a Canadian uniform.

In conferring "Veteran recognition" to former CF members, there is agreement between Veterans Affairs Canada and DND that the designation of "Veteran" is solely for "commemorative" and "public recognition" purposes. Access to VAC benefits and services are based on need or other defined eligibility and not recognition as a "Veteran". In other words, Veteran status, in and of itself, does not carry with it the right to any benefits.

That's the end of my statement.

Given the number of people you are going to be responsible for, I'm sure you have your work cut out for you. Once again, I'd like to say that you've displayed the kind of integrity and the qualifications that make me feel very comfortable with you in this position. Thank you for that.

It is stated on your website that you can "refuse to deal with a request for review, except if the request was made by the Minister". Under what circumstances would you refuse to deal with such a request?

• (1140)

Col Patrick Stogran: Mr. Chair, with all due respect, that's a highly speculative question. In the first instance, I will flatly refuse to get drawn into political debates; that's in my background and upbringing. My place is with the veterans and to champion their causes. The only situation where I might refuse is where I have to compromise my own principles, which I'm not prepared to do. But once again, that's very speculative, and I can't imagine a situation arising to that effect.

Mrs. Betty Hinton: Great. That's wonderful to hear. I appreciate your answer. It came right off your website, so that's the reason I asked.

Do you foresee yourself working closely with the DND ombudsman?

Col Patrick Stogran: Mr. Chair, the DND ombudsman has actually been a tremendous help to me in my teething weeks at the job. He has a considerable amount of experience in many issues that affect veterans. One of my expectations coming into the job was that I would be the Veteran Affairs counterpart to the DND ombudsman. Certainly we have started off on a collaborative venture. In order to offer our veterans a seamless transition from uniform into the civilian world, I fully expect that will certainly continue. I'm confident that we'll have a stronger bond, professionally.

Mrs. Betty Hinton: Thank you.

The advisory committee was raised by Mr. Stoffer earlier. In your opinion, what qualifications would the members of the advisory committee have to possess, and is there an application process for those who want to be a part of that committee?

Col Patrick Stogran: Mr. Chair, once again, I've formulated a philosophy, although the exact mechanics are yet to be determined. At the risk of being premature, and I don't want to come across like I'm thinking out loud, but my intention is to have representatives from each of the generations of operations. I would omit World War I, because in fact that's Mr. Babcock and I just visited him in Spokane, and it would be a little unfair to ask him to have a representative.

I am referring to representatives from World War II, Korea, and UN operations in a generic sense, not wanting to get caught in the rhetoric regarding what peacekeeping is. It would include NATO operations and other operations in support of Canadian policy; personnel who have served on operations in support of recognized ally operations; and members of the RCMP veterans community. I would also seek to have serving members of the Canadian Forces and the RCMP, and Veterans Affairs should have a voice. At this point I would like to see a representative from the legal profession as well as the medical profession. Although I don't have firm criteria or terms of reference for selection, certainly an understanding of the veteran situation by virtue of having served in one of these wars is important. The person representing that generation would have to be familiar with the problems of the veteran. I would add that I would also accept a family member from any one of those categories to represent the plight of the veteran. It would be a highly individual process, and I would see that being the ombudsman's responsibility.

• (1145)

Mrs. Betty Hinton: Thank you.

I look forward to your first uncensored report.

The Chair: Fair enough.

That completes our first round. Now we move on to what's known as the second round, which is five minutes for each.

We will go over to the Liberal Party. Ms. Guarnieri.

Hon. Albina Guarnieri (Mississauga East—Cooksville, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

First I would like to welcome you to the committee, which I'm sure is going to be a regular home for you over the next year. I hope you are made to feel very welcome.

I have to say that we watched the selection of the ombudsman very closely after the government broke its election promise by

appointing two defeated Conservative MPs to VRAB in a return to brazen patronage. I'm especially happy to see that a former military officer with the field experience you have is looking after the interest of veterans. That is very welcome news for us.

Let me first focus on the mandate, the role, and the budget you have been provided with. Originally we had been told by the defence ombudsman that a veterans ombudsman could be done with a budget of as little as \$250,000 a year. At the time I think we all recognized that this figure would be a fraction of the true cost given what's spent on VRAB and the Bureau of Pensions Advocates. I understand you have a budget right now of approximately \$5 million. Perhaps you could tell us how you feel the budget number fits with expected demands and how it compares to the budget and services provided by the defence ombudsman. Have you had the chance to compare that?

Col Patrick Stogran: Mr. Chair, in all honesty, I have spent the last two weeks focused on gaining an understanding of veterans issues, as well as defining in my mind exactly what an ombudsman means in terms of research. I have not had an opportunity to go line item by line through the budget. It would be premature for me to comment at this point.

Hon. Albina Guarnieri: Perhaps at a later date you could give us some insight on how you are faring, whether you feel your budget should be expanded and whether it's sufficient for your mandate.

Following the same vein of comparing the roles and defining the boundaries of the veterans ombudsman relative to the defence ombudsman, there seems to be a definite divide when a soldier or veteran must take his complaint to the defence ombudsman unless he or she has filed an application to become a client of Veterans Affairs. Do you foresee any circumstances where veterans don't fall in that category but they ought to be able to file a complaint with you? Have you had a chance to give that some thought?

Col Patrick Stogran: Mr. Chair, I've been doing a lot of thinking, not necessarily directly in that respect. Suffice it to say that because of the relationship I'm developing with the defence ombudsman, and because we want to be an inclusive organization and have that human touch—and certainly retired Canadian Forces personnel are indeed veterans—I'm confident that whatever bureaucratic impediments there might be, individuals will not slip through the cracks. Between Monsieur Côté and I, the best interests of recently retired service members will certainly be tended to.

Hon. Albina Guarnieri: Your answer is refreshing. We'll certainly be looking to see whether you have the latitude to fill the voids and the gaps.

On the issue of role, I wonder if you could tell me where your position fits within the public service as compared to the ombudsman for National Defence. Often the intended influence of an office is indicated by the relative seniority of the office-holder. Is your position equivalent to a DM, an ADM, a DG? How does it compare with the ombudsman for National Defence, for instance?

• (1150)

Col Patrick Stogran: Mr. Chair, I'd be lying if I said I wasn't surprised at the designation of the office, knowing the level the DND ombudsman and having read the report and the recommendations. In fact, the veterans ombudsman is the equivalent of an EX-2 or a DG.

My family is not going to starve. I took the job for the job itself, much like I've done my entire career. But having said that, it has created certain impediments, the knock-on effect of the more junior staff employed within the office of the ombudsman. Also, some of the delegations internally are being viewed as delegations that would be at the DG level rather than the level I would expect of the ombudsman.

Moreover, I can foresee, perhaps with my successor, not as much with me, where the people working at the ADM and DM level might view the position as being more the working level of the DG. I say that for my successor, because I fully intend to exercise the latitude the office warrants.

Finally, my concern is with the feelings of the veterans. I think they would have the same expectations that I would have coming into the job, that their ombudsman would be of no lesser stature than the ombudsman for the serving members.

Hon. Albina Guarnieri: Well, certainly, there is cause for concern here—

The Chair: No, no. Albina—

Hon. Albina Guarnieri: —because the status of your position relative—

The Chair: Albina, no.

Hon. Albina Guarnieri: I'm making a final comment, Chair.

The Chair: You're at six minutes and 30 seconds.

Hon. Albina Guarnieri: I think this is an important point, though, Chair.

The Chair: Well, then, you'll get another chance.

All right. Now we're on to Monsieur Gaudet with the Bloc Québécois for five minutes.

[Translation]

Mr. Roger Gaudet (Montcalm, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Good morning, Mr. Stogran.

My questions are usually quite simple, but they mean everything. I'm going to ask you one: are you a veteran?

[English]

Col Patrick Stogran: Mr. Chair, I am indeed a veteran, by any definition of the word, through service in special duty areas, or merely having taken my retirement from the Canadian Forces.

[Translation]

Mr. Roger Gaudet: I ask that question because, this week, we heard the testimony of a man who has worked in the Canadian Armed Forces for 20 years but who is not considered a veteran. He has been coping with post-traumatic stress disorder for a few years now. He came to meet with us on Tuesday of this week. We want to pass a motion later to submit the report on this subject to you.

I don't understand what you mean. Are all former military personnel veterans?

[English]

Col Patrick Stogran: Mr. Chair, as was mentioned by one of the members of the committee, former members of the Canadian Forces who have finished their engagement and who have retired are considered to be veterans.

[Translation]

Mr. Roger Gaudet: So I'm going to put my question differently. Is there an ombudsman who defends former military members? Veterans have the Canadian Legion, in particular. They have an ombudsman and all the rest. How is it that former military personnel are constantly forced to provide proof and that there is no one to defend them? The witness who appeared this week has been trying for seven years to prove that he is sick, but no one is defending him.

[English]

Col Patrick Stogran: Mr. Chair, I'm not sure I understand.

The lack of an ombudsman on behalf of a past member of the Canadian Forces is being referred to. I'm in that position now, and I certainly would take that on with a sense of urgency.

We've had upwards of 150 complaints come into the office in the last two weeks. It's almost like changing the tire on a moving car. We're trying to address the most compelling ones, with a view to making an impact in the short term, so with this particular individual, the office is open for business.

• (1155)

[Translation]

Mr. Roger Gaudet: You will definitely receive the report soon. We're going to send it to you. The Canadian Armed Forces have no program designed to defend those who leave the Forces. Some of them went to Bosnia, Haiti and Afghanistan, but, since wars weren't involved, mountains of paperwork have to be completed in order to prove that they are veterans and that they are entitled to a pension.

In fact, my question is simple, no one defends these people. You're being appointed special advisor or ombudsman, but that's not very important. I want to know whether you are actually going to defend these people or whether it's the department that you're going to defend.

[English]

Col Patrick Stogran: Mr. Chair, I'd rather not respond to the question. I am the veterans ombudsman. I've made my statement that their cause is indeed my commitment.

There's no question that a person in need who has served overseas, whether it was the so-called peacekeeping missions that were out of sight, out of mind, when we were bringing body bags back home anonymously in the old days.... In my experience, I was shot at, shelled, spat on, and had knives pulled on me. I was detained as a so-called peacekeeper. There are probably not many people around who have more compassion for the plight of these personnel, many of whom came back under different terms before we started establishing the OSISS clinics, before the Canadian Forces started getting involved in operational stress injuries in a big way.

At the risk of speaking outside my particular mandate, it's my understanding that the Canadian Forces, in their treatment of occupational stress casualties, are also reaching out to those former members who may have slipped through the cracks in the past.

All I can say is that all the retired members of the Canadian Forces, especially so-called peacekeepers—and I shouldn't be singling them out—should all understand that I have an empathy for what they went through in the watershed years of the 1990s.

The Chair: Monsieur Gaudet, your time is up, I'm sorry. You're already over. That's the way it is.

[Translation]

Mr. Roger Gaudet: You're going to find out what real life is like.

[English]

The Chair: They all agree to these times to begin with—

[Translation]

Mr. Roger Gaudet: I want to tell you that your experience is convincing. I congratulate you. If I'm still here in a few years, I'm going to watch you go.

[English]

The Chair: They all agree on the times to begin with, but then when you try to enforce them, they all get...anyhow.

All right. Now we're back over to Mr. Shipley and the Conservative Party, for five minutes.

Mr. Bev Shipley (Lambton—Kent—Middlesex, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Colonel and Ombudsman, I really appreciate the fact that you're here.

That's secondary, quite honestly, to the fact that we now have an ombudsman and that we have someone like you, with your credentials—someone who has been active and is so open to talking to people about your experience for us to understand, and you want to move ahead in an efficient manner.

I'm glad we have moved ahead with this position. Obviously it's a position I think should have been in place many years ago, but no one took the initiative to make that happen. I'm glad we're here.

With the number of applications you're talking about, I'm suspecting we will see some sort of a peak over a period of time.

As we have talked with witnesses, people who have been in front of us on a number of events, from VIP to post-traumatic stress disorder to the Veterans Review and Appeal Board—all of those—there really has been an issue about having someone to speak for them, so I thank you for that.

Do you feel you do not have the latitude in your position to do your job?

• (1200)

Col Patrick Stogran: Mr. Chair, to an extent I addressed that in the discussion of the mandate earlier, in that I consider the absence of specific direction or guidance to be an opportunity and not a constraint.

In terms of latitude, I see all sorts of ways that I can value-add in ways that are more than just between the lines, but right off the page of the mandate as written.

I may come across as talking tough, but I want to keep that bit of a rough edge. The people who work in the bureaucracy on behalf of Veterans Affairs Canada I detect are genuinely concerned about the welfare of the veterans, and it's very easy, I think, to get drawn into their paradigm. It's my intention, as much as possible, to remain focused on the plight of the veterans and to allow my staff to work the mechanisms of government, so that I don't get drawn into a set paradigm and so that I can expand the latitude within the legal limits.

The major restriction in the mandate as drafted is that I have to operate within the law. The decision-making process is under legislation and is in fact law, so the short answer is no, at this point in time, I don't feel any restriction on my latitude.

Mr. Bev Shipley: Colonel, in your comments there was a bit of a preamble, but you would make a rapid decision-action cycle a high priority of your office, recognizing the overlaid amount of bureaucracy. Can you touch on how that's actually going to happen? We may hear it, but we want some comfort that actually, for the veterans, it may happen.

Col Patrick Stogran: Mr. Chair, once again, we're still in the formative and I'd say philosophical phases, but I think I can address the member's question satisfactorily.

As I've said, to date we've had some degree of success in standing up the office, but I must say that the staffing process has been painfully slow. We're still formulating the terms of reference that allow us to get the calibre of people we want in the office. Suffice it to say that the general concept of operations we're looking at is to establish what I would refer to in a very generic sense as intake officers, who will, in the first instance, make contact with the veterans or the clients, if you will—the broader veteran community—who are seeking our services, and maintain contact with them in a personal way. I suspect that if Monsieur Côté's experiences are any reflection on the way we'll be doing business, a large part of their job will be simply referring the client to the proper place to resolve the problem.

Within that decision cycle, if you will, any problems that can be handled in a fairly immediate fashion will be handled within that intake cycle. It won't be until we identify perhaps a series of complaints that might indicate a larger systemic problem that we'll actually go to formulating specialized teams with a more focused mandate. The intention is to solve things at the lowest possible level and empower the staff to make decisions rather than to seek the guidance of higher levels of authority.

Mr. Bev Shipley: Thank you.

The Chair: Fair enough, thank you.

Now we're back to the Liberal Party.

Mr. Temelkovski, five minutes.

Mr. Lui Temelkovski (Oak Ridges—Markham, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for coming to us today. Also, I'd like to thank you for your service to Canada.

I'd like to ask you a number of questions very fast. Has the position been advertised within Canada. Are veterans aware of the position yet, and how is it being done?

Col Patrick Stogran: Mr. Chair, to understand the question correctly, is the fact that I have taken up the post been advertised, or is it in terms of the hiring?

Mr. Lui Temelkovski: Yes, in terms of your taking the post, promoting the position.

• (1205)

Col Patrick Stogran: Mr. Chair, I get the impression, certainly on the feedback I'm personally receiving, that the veterans community at large is certainly aware of my taking up the post. I think because of my notoriety with Afghanistan, aspects of the media that wouldn't normally be interested in the appointment may have taken it on. So I'm confident there is a good awareness, an understanding that the ombudsman's office is open for business. Indeed, if the number of complaints we've received thus far is any indication, then we're off to a good start.

Mr. Lui Temelkovski: You're stationed in Ottawa. Will you be able to travel across Canada to meet concerned parties?

Col Patrick Stogran: Mr. Chair, as I said earlier, my intention is to treat this as I would have a higher command position in the military. I will find a chief of staff, a director general of operations,

or a second-in-command, if you will, who understands the machinations of government and knows how to make things happen.

My place is in the trenches with the troops, getting out there and putting a face and a voice on our endeavours. I'm looking forward to meeting as many veterans as I can and developing an empathy with them. It started with my visit to Mr. Babcock's residence in Spokane last week.

Mr. Lui Temelkovski: Excellent.

Of the 150 cases or so you've received, what would be the two major areas of concern that veterans have brought to you so far?

Col Patrick Stogran: Mr. Chair, at this point, we have not had sufficient trends for me to be able to comment. I think they cover the full spectrum, from too long a cycle to get decisions made to difficulty preparing cases, interpretations of length of service, and those sorts of things. With the number of cases, I don't think we can establish a trend at this point.

Mr. Lui Temelkovski: Thank you.

Now I'll turn it over to my colleague. He has a couple more questions within his time.

Mr. Brent St. Denis: Thanks, Lui.

As to questions about the mandate and where in the scheme of things the veterans ombudsman is and how that relativity may or may not affect the role, those are things we'll certainly ask the minister when he is here.

Let me say that I believe you will do your utmost, given the tools you have to do the job. If it's appropriate, if not in this mandate, then a future mandate, to have a different set of tools and a bigger tool box, then so be it. I'm sure you won't be shy to speak up.

Let me also be the first one here today to invite you to my part of Canada, which is in northern Ontario. I would be most pleased to assist your office to meet any of my legions or veterans in any setting, in a very non-partisan way, of course.

My colleague asked about promoting the position. I believe people are aware you're in place, but I think it's very important that you say your job is also to be out there, to be that face—if I can use that word—of the position, with a good director of operations keeping the shop humming along. Your being the face of support, comfort, and a handup for veterans is very, very important.

I should come to a question here. You suggested in your presentation that by spring you'll have an operation of some level, and that by roughly a year from now you'll have a full-scale operation. Is that based on conversations with the National Defence and Canadian Forces ombudsman or with others? There are ombudsmen positions at the provincial level in industry across the country, so presumably you've had a chance to speak to some of them about that experience.

How did you come to an expectation that it might take that timeframe to become fully operational?

● (1210)

Col Patrick Stogran: Mr. Chair, if I may just refer back to my discussion of the advisory committee, the current question reminded me that I omitted the consideration of aboriginal representation on the advisory committee—veteran aboriginal people.

Regarding the standing up of the office and the timeline, I've articulated it roughly as it is. I think the critical path is going to be the staffing process and getting quality people, people with the right fit for the job. At this point we've hired temporary investigators to achieve quick successes, but I feel the amount of time it will take us to get a skeletal permanent staff on the ground will be around spring to summer. Then we'll be able to be a little more systematic in our approach to things, if you will, in terms of the longer-term approaches.

Mr. Brent St. Denis: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Now we're back over to the Conservative Party.

Go ahead, please, Mr. Sweet, for five minutes.

Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Let me address you as “Colonel” first. Thank you very much for your service to this nation, and particularly with the multiple theatres of operation that you explained you'd been in. It's fortunate that you're here today, given the number of things you had to endure, especially unarmed. I appreciate the fact that you're here.

You mentioned that as the ombudsman you're dedicated to “mission, buddy, self”. For the record, I'd assume that “mission, buddy, self” is going to be the veteran, your internal staff, and then of course yourself.

Col Patrick Stogran: Mr. Chair, I would sort of characterize that my mission is to serve the veterans. My staff will have the same selfless dedication that I will. The “buddy” is the veteran. So the mission is to ensure that we are pursuing fair treatment for all of our veterans in terms of the delivery of the services they should be entitled to. I am the champion of their rights and interests, in the pursuit of fair treatment for our veterans. I put the interests of the veterans ahead of the interests of myself or my staff. Then, finally, the third is worrying about whether or not I get an extension to this job. That's well down the list.

Mr. David Sweet: That's great. If the veteran fulfills two of those aspects, then it's even more highly principled than what I initially thought.

You said, “During my military career I never strayed from that principle”, and you were talking about the fact that principled stances are not always the best career moves one can make.

I would think that if that's been your history, then you're also prepared to make sure that any of your findings are 100% exposed, no matter what the cost of those who would have to hear them.

Col Patrick Stogran: Mr. Chair, that's absolutely the case. I think I have three hallmarks that will characterize the office.

The first one is consultation and collaboration with the veterans. We have to be one with them.

Regarding the second one, I have been doing a lot of pontificating, if you will, or philosophizing about this particular job, because it's been stressed to me by several ombudsmen that I should be impartial. I can't see being impartial when in fact I am representing. I do have a bias towards the veteran.

However, that's not to say that the second hallmark won't be objectivity. In order to be objective, we have to be thorough in our research and investigation. We have to be thoughtful in our consideration and pragmatic in our recommendations. That's going to be very important. Two things that we can never lose as the office of the ombudsman are, first, credibility, and then second, the support of the public, who right now are very sympathetic and compassionate towards our veterans. So objectivity is a very important concern.

Mr. David Sweet: My final question is just to clarify some of your testimony and make sure.... You said:

I hasten to add that Veterans Affairs has been proactive in setting up the office of the veterans ombudsman. A skeleton project staff has been working for some months studying the DND ombudsman, drafting organizational charts and job descriptions, establishing infrastructure, and even receiving and logging complaints from clients....

I want to give you the opportunity to clarify. I take it that with all of this skeleton staff and everything you're setting up, you still have 100% leadership capability and veto power over anything that's set up in your office, and it will be set up according to what you feel your mandate is in defending veterans.

● (1215)

Col Patrick Stogran: Mr. Chair, I would have to add to my last comment that the third hallmark would be independence, one that I will protect vigorously. I can say without hesitation that I have been totally independent to date. The staff that has been assigned, a few staff members who've been seconded to the ombudsman position and consider themselves seconded in the plainest definition of the word, have been laying the groundwork for my approval. No decisions have been taken. They've done yeoman's service in doing mounds of paperwork that I was probably dreading most about this particular job.

As a matter of fact, they came to me just yesterday, saying it's time for them, if need be, to truly serve the office of the ombudsman and reflect the independence I've already articulated as being of critical importance, that I have to sign them on formally as staff, and they shouldn't be serving two masters.

The independence part is very important to me, and I can say it's going to be manifest in the culture of everybody who's employed in the ombudsman's office.

The Chair: Now we're back to Mr. Stoffer, with the New Democratic Party, for five minutes.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Thank you once again, sir.

You can understand Mr. Perron's concerns about the fact that we did a unanimous report, and some recommendations of that report haven't yet been met by the government. We're concerned about that because not only opposition members signed on to that report but Conservative members as well. We have concerns about certain aspects of the report. Then again, we'll deal with the minister on that, not specifically you. You can understand some of the frustration.

Of course, as you mentioned, one of the keys is independence, the ability to do what you think is best for the veterans and their families. You said in your presentation to us that Veterans Affairs Canada has been very proactive in helping you set up the office. How many people work for you now who are still with...? For example, the intake office in Charlottetown would deviate.

I'm not sure if you've had a chance to check the testimony—you probably haven't—of the buildup to this veterans ombudsman position, but the Veterans Review and Appeal Board, to be honest with you, let's put it mildly, was not favourable to your being here. I think if they had their way, they would probably not want to see you, but you're here now and they're going to see you.

My concern, of course, is independence. Do you still have people working for you who still work for Veterans Affairs Canada? If they do, when will that separation take place, true independence?

Col Patrick Stogran: Mr. Chair, if the member is looking for a precise number, I'd have to come back to the committee, but I believe the number is five, one senior representative and I think four intake investigators. I would have to confirm that. I have not had a chance yet to visit Charlottetown. I've put that lower down on my priority list, after getting around to the veterans.

As I mentioned, certainly for the senior person who is representing the office of the ombudsman in Charlottetown right now, I issued the executive yesterday for her to commence the paperwork to formally cut ties with Veterans Affairs and report solely to me so she doesn't serve two masters.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Thank you.

My colleague from the Liberal Party asked about what level you believe the ombudsman position should be in relation to levels within VAC? Should it be an ADM or a DM level, or have you even considered that, in comparison?

Col Patrick Stogran: Mr. Chair, as I mentioned, I came into the job expecting it would be at the level of an EX-4, which I believe is the level for the DND ombudsman, because I expect I will deal, at a minimum, at the ADM level. Moreover, the chief of staff or second-

in-command or director general I was referring to, I feel should have the experience of an EX-2 to be able to work within the larger system, if you will.

Finally, a very important part of the office of the veterans ombudsman will be outreach and communications. That job should be for a fairly senior person, IS-6 level minimum. So it's the knock-on effect of the lower ranking that's very important.

● (1220)

Mr. Peter Stoffer: In conclusion, sir, because I may not get another chance, veterans receive either cheques or statements from VAC regarding their pensions or disability amounts on a periodic basis. One thing they've asked me is why they don't include more information in those envelopes they get. One suggestion: I would advise you to advise the department or DND to put who you are, your phone number and address, in those envelopes so people right across the country can have access to who you are and what you're able to do.

My last question is in that regard. As you know, there's a lot of cross-reference between DND and VAC. For example, veterans are very concerned about section 31 of the Canadian Forces Superannuation Act concerning marriage after 60 years of age, which means that if your spouse dies and you remarry after 60 and then you die, your second spouse isn't entitled to any benefits. That's a DND policy, but it affects veterans. If I had that problem as a veteran and I came to you for help, how would you solve that issue? The DND ombudsman would tell me that as veteran you've got to go to the veterans ombudsman, but it's a DND problem. How would you solve something of that nature? You're going to see, as you go along, a lot of cross-references in that regard.

Col Patrick Stogran: Mr. Chair, once again, that's speculative in terms of the specificity of that particular case, but I'm quite confident that both I and the DND ombudsman, Monsieur Côté, are of like mind, that the client comes first. Also, without exposing myself to the details of his investigations, he has dabbled in issues that affect veterans. I think it's incumbent on me and Monsieur Côté to come up with a strategy and plan for each individual case, recognizing their complexity, and to identify where we can get most bang for the buck, with a view to the best interests of the members. It's that working relationship, hand in glove, which is why I expected the veterans ombudsman would be of an EX-4 stature or thereabouts.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Thank you.

The Chair: You'll find many questions around this place are highly speculative.

Now over to the Conservative Party, with Mr. Cannan, for five minutes.

Mr. Ron Cannan (Kelowna—Lake Country, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

This is all factual, no speculation.

I want to add my accolades to you, Colonel, and I'll call you Mr. Ombudsman, for your years of service to our country and now taking on another challenge. It sounds as if you're up for the challenge and looking forward to the opportunities and helping your colleagues and veterans throughout our country.

I represent Kelowna—Lake Country in the interior of British Columbia. We have a number of seniors and veterans, and I look forward to having you come as well to the.... Bill Tanner, whom I was speaking to yesterday, is our local champion representing a lot of the veterans, and he said to pass along his congratulations to you as well. I know the many others who have come to my office after your announcement are looking forward to the positive results to come.

One of the issues this committee has been discussing—and I'm fairly new to it—is the issue of talking not only to our veterans but also to our existing members in the service. You served for a number of years, and as a newly retired member now sitting as the ombudsman, do you think there's some value in this committee going around to the different forces and talking with some of the members on the bases to find out how they feel about veterans? Can you recall, as a serving member, seeing how Veterans Affairs Canada treated veterans?

Col Patrick Stogran: Mr. Chair, first of all, regarding Mr. Bill Tanner, I'm off to Calgary next week, and I'm adding an extra leg to my trip to go to Peachland to visit Mr. Tanner as well as Ken Barwise, both of whom came to my attention very early in my tenure as being people I should meet with. So I look forward to meeting Mr. Tanner.

Regarding meeting young soldiers, personally my approach to business—and far be it from me to make recommendations to the committee, but I certainly think my place is to meet young soldiers. I would suggest that where we separate the traditional veteran from the peacekeeping veteran from the modern veteran in Afghanistan, the monitor or tag line I'm embracing is that there's one veteran, and the needs of the so-called traditional veteran or the veterans of war service are going to be exactly the same as the needs of our so-called peacekeepers probably 20 years hence and what our young soldiers, sailors, and air force personnel serving in Afghanistan today might need 40 or 50 years hence.

The question was how did I feel as a young officer about veterans and that sort of thing. I must say, in all reality, the importance of institutions such as ANAVETS and the Legion completely escaped me. I never in my wildest dreams as a young person expected to be a veteran, and I must say that even though I used to instill in the young soldiers the importance of logging every injury and every sort of trauma you incur throughout your career, for veteran reasons, I was

sadly negligent throughout my career, and it's coming back to haunt me now. All that to say I have another message that should be conveyed to those young troops who are serving Canada valiantly now in the campaign on terror.

• (1225)

Mr. Ron Cannan: That's very encouraging. I appreciate those words of experience as well, and I think we all take that to heart.

I have one other comment dealing with veterans. As we listened to the witnesses on Tuesday...many times they're dealing with a very emotional issue, and I appreciate your independence and experience, and the credibility, the objectivity, and the integrity you bring to the role. But for a veteran who comes to the committee, sometimes they're afraid of bringing issues forward maybe because of lack of confidence: they might be reprimanded down the road or their pensions might be affected. What kind of system will you have in place to ensure their interests are protected and there are no repercussions to bringing issues forward?

Col Patrick Stogran: I can only say that as the champion of the rights and interests of the veterans—that's how I would refer to it—if they are poorly treated for voicing their opinion or whatever, whether it's not receiving the benefits and services they are entitled to as a veteran or they're being poorly treated because of something they said...to me it's seamless; I will champion the rights and interests of the veteran.

I'm not sure if that answers the question. Certainly anything that comes to the ombudsman's office is going to be treated with absolute confidentiality and will not be passed to third parties without the explicit permission of the individual. I think certainly in my experience now, the reception I've had from the war veterans...I speak the same language they do, so they're comfortable telling me like it is. I think the communication and the confidentiality are inherent in my office. They won't have a problem there.

Mr. Ron Cannan: I appreciate that.

Thank you very much for your dedication, and I look forward to maybe meeting you in the Okanagan if you see Mr. Tanner, and we'll chat again.

Thanks.

The Chair: Now we're back to the Bloc Québécois and Mr. Perron for five minutes.

[Translation]

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: I could call you an electrical engineer, which is what I am too. There will no doubt be occasions when there are good currents between us, but there could also be sparks, which might cause a short circuit.

Words like “independence” resonate like a song in the ears of a Bloc member and Québécois. I very much appreciate your presentation this morning. I believe in your sincerity. I think you're going to do everything in your power to do your job well. I want to give you the benefit of the doubt. Even though the benefit of the doubt is not a very popular concept among veterans, I'm nevertheless going to give it to you and wish you good luck. If I can help you do your job, I'll be pleased to add my two bits.

In view of all the problems that you'll be facing, your job won't be easy. I wish you good luck and I congratulate you.

● (1230)

Col Patrick Stogran: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I believe that consultations will be as important for the Office of the Veterans Ombudsman as discussions with veterans and the complaints they will be submitting. Thank you very much.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

We're over to Ms. Guarnieri, with the Liberals, for five minutes.

Hon. Albina Guarnieri: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Let me add my voice to Gilles'. We have no doubt that you're sincere and that you have the best of intentions. But I for one am very disappointed to hear about the status they've ascribed to your position.

Essentially what I see is that your scope has been limited. The status of your position relative to the defence ombudsman impacts your role in matters that overlap between the two departments. After all the rhetoric this government has given in putting veterans first, the government has made the position of the ombudsman at Veterans Affairs a junior one. My personal feeling is that now that the government has created the role, they have to elevate you to the status the veterans deserve. I don't think it should be done at some place in the future; it should be done immediately.

Having said that, I have one last question to ask. To the issue of scope, could you relate the role you expect to play in improving the quality of care in the long-term care facilities around the country? Previously there were VAC employees who held varying titles, from ombudsman to quality care officers, in this regard. How do you intend to work with the existing internal monitoring roles within the department itself to deal with potential complaints arising from patient care? You're going to have to go through the entire bureaucratic maze. I wonder if you could share some insights as to how you think you're going to deal with this.

Col Patrick Stogran: Mr. Chair, I might say, in all honesty, I consider the bureaucratic maze to be a little bit daunting, and I couldn't get into specifics on how we might challenge that. That's why, to my mind, having a senior, experienced bureaucrat who understands how bureaucracies work, and whom I can bully and lean on, can assist me in cutting through the red tape. Certainly the long-term care facilities are something I have reviewed in the past. I'll be visiting Ste. Anne's Hospital tomorrow. It is a concern.

I think my biggest ally is, first of all, the credibility I have as a veteran myself, and also, once again, the public notoriety. It's my full

intention, if I may use a bit of a crass term, to exploit that and to be the voice of veterans, to be one with the veterans.

I might add, regarding the rank, that I've never throughout my career.... I stayed in the infantry because I like a fight, and I certainly don't feel that is going to hinder my ability to identify problems or “front up” to the desk that the ombudsman fronts up to. It might be the perception of the person on the other side of the desk as to the stature of the position, but I fully intend to make the most of the next three years, to be heard and to pay attention to detail.

I can make no promises as to how much I'll be able to accomplish, because, once again, I feel the whole red tape thing and the bureaucracy to be a bit daunting, but I would submit that even if my accomplishments are nowhere near my expectations or desires, every step will be in the right direction and will be for improving the lives and well-being of our veterans. That's what I'm committed to in the next three years.

● (1235)

Hon. Albina Guarnieri: I certainly like your fighting spirit. This committee is here to assist you in achieving your mandate and your purpose. I predicted earlier that this committee might become home for you, and I have a feeling my predictions may come true.

Of course, we'd love to have you back when you've had time to digest the full spectrum of your mandate and sized up what you're up against.

Thank you, sir.

The Chair: At this stage, committee members, we have some more spots available, but I think we've exhausted the questions, unless I see any people wishing to...? Okay.

We have other business to deal with potentially, with a notice of motion from Mr. St. Denis.

At this stage, Colonel Stogran, I would like to thank you very much for presenting to us today. I was touched by your mission, buddy, self motto. I was very impressed as well that you wanted to go and visit our First World War veteran, Mr. Babcock, the oldest surviving one we have, I'm sure. We certainly don't have anyone left from the Boer War or anything like that. So I was impressed by that.

My favourite politician of all time was Augustus or Octavius. He honoured the veterans of Rome tremendously, and many of his efforts brought stability to the Roman Empire. Anyhow, I think your role is very important and it's good.

I'll offer this to you as well. Thanks for coming today. The notice of motion, if Mr. St. Denis wishes to bring it forward, is very relevant. So I would say even though you're a witness, you're welcome to hang around for it, if he....

Mr. Brent St. Denis: Mr. Chairman, if the colonel would be willing to stand by for five minutes, I don't think it'll take longer than a few minutes.

The Chair: You'll learn something in the process.

We're going to take a brief couple of minutes for people to say hello to him and all those sorts of things.

• (1235)

(Pause)

• (1240)

The Chair: The next point of business is to deal with the notice of motion. I hope whatever you have to say subsequent to that will—

Mr. Peter Stoffer: One must always invite her—

The Chair: I don't know what you're talking about, Mr. Stoffer. I'm going to treat that as a point of order until I rule on it.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: On a point of order, then, the ombudsman was here, and it was great to see him. He also brought his director of communications, Julie Harris, who is over there. She'll be the one who most of us will probably interact with.

The Chair: I'll rule that's not a point of order, but you've said it. I believe it was a point of debate.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: She is a reservist and serves her country as well, so there you go.

The Chair: All right. We have a notice of motion, and it's based on one of our last meetings. It's Brent St. Denis' motion. I guess it's technically a motion now because it was a notice of motion at the last meeting. Here it is:

That the recently appointed first Veterans Affairs Ombudsman be sent a copy of the Veterans Affairs Committee testimony of the November 27th, 2007 meeting during which witnesses Jenifer Migneault and her husband Claude Rainville provided a case study in how difficult it seems for veterans diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder to access services. And further that at some appropriate time, as soon as possible after his office has been established and he considers their testimony, the Ombudsmen be asked to offer his comments and possible recommendations.

Mr. St. Denis said it was a good way to get the ball rolling, so I'll turn the floor over to him.

Mr. Brent St. Denis: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I think all of us were very impressed with the courage of the couple who appeared on Tuesday. In a way they are representative of many veterans and their families who have dealt with the red tape and lack of timeliness in their dealings with Veterans Affairs, or DND in this case. While I believe the public service does its best, there are systemic issues that need to be dealt with.

I think it would be a way to thank the couple for appearing, that what they said was important enough that we have asked the ombudsman to look at the testimony, and that in due course, without any undue pressure on him or his office, which is in evolution, that they look at this as a terrible example of what it's like for some veterans to deal with the department. Particularly as the husband in this case is dealing with post-traumatic stress disorder, for people

like him, red tape and timeliness are even more important. It's bad enough that you have a leg injury, but if it's a mental injury, then I think those concerns add to the injury. If it was just a leg injury, it wouldn't add to the injury, but in this case the mental injury does.

I want to pass a couple of grammatical corrections to the clerk, but I won't bother the committee with those minor details.

I'd like to move this motion. It's our first, and I presume, as a committee, we can make references to the ombudsman. He will do what he sees fit with any recommendation or reference from us, but to get the ball rolling, something we've heard more than once, I thought we could pass that testimony on to the ombudsman.

• (1245)

The Chair: Thank you.

Monsieur Perron.

[Translation]

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: Mr. Chairman, I'd like to move an amendment to Mr. St. Denis' motion.

I'd like to delete what follows the words “diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder” and replace it with “psychological injury”. The words “post-traumatic stress disorder” could be put in parentheses. That disorder is an injury due to a military operation, in the same respect as the amputation of an arm or leg. It is a psychological injury. Rather than use the term “post-traumatic stress disorder”, which scares everyone, we should call a spade a spade.

I would like to hear my colleagues' comments on the subject.

[English]

The Chair: I think it's considered a friendly amendment by Mr. St. Denis.

Mr. Brent St. Denis: Peter mentioned a possible friendly amendment as well.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Stoffer.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Yes, sir. Because the ombudsman's office is just getting set up and we're going to be having lots of testimony with the minister and with officials and with other people, just at the end of it we should also include—as a friendly amendment to this motion—that we send all copies of all our meetings to the ombudsman's department for their heads-up on things that may be coming down the pipe that would save them a lot of time.

I don't think at the beginning, although I'm being presumptuous here, that they would probably have staff that could attend every one of our meetings, so in the interim, we can send them our meetings—anything that's not confidential, of course, or without permission—so they can have access to what we're saying and doing.

The Chair: We have some other speakers here.

We're going to go to Mr. Shipley and then Mr. St. Denis.

Mr. Bev Shipley: This is just a point. I don't have an issue with that, Peter, but I just don't think it should be an amendment to this motion. I think this motion should stand on its own.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: We'll just do it anyway.

Mr. Bev Shipley: We can have a separate one, and it may just go as direction. I'm not sure how this works, but we used to be able to just have a direction that minutes would go to the ombudsman. However, it works, I'd just keep it separate from this one. I think this is a stand-alone, Brent.

The Chair: We're discussing the mechanics of this. They're all publicly available, but it's a question of whether or not the draft versions of the blues would be the ones sent to the ombudsman. We're just considering the mechanics of it. Anyhow, we'll move on to the discussion.

Monsieur St. Denis.

• (1250)

Mr. Brent St. Denis: I have two quick points. First, I'm glad to accept Peter's friendly amendment, if there's unanimous consent and with the clerk's judgment about whatever level of minutes would be appropriate, but I take Bev's point separately that they be sent to the ombudsman. Do we all agree that it be done as a separate thing?

Peter?

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Sure.

Mr. Brent St. Denis: I would just conclude by suggesting that if this is agreed to, I want to point out to the ombudsman's office that I deliberately asked the witnesses in the meeting if they would grant permission for the ombudsman's office to contact them, should they decide to do so, and the answer was yes. The only thing they're lacking is phone numbers.

The Chair: All right.

Monsieur Perron.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: I'd simply like to support what Bev said about Peter's amendment. The documents are available through the "blues" and appear on the veterans' site some time afterwards. However, if we want to expedite matters, we can let the clerk send a copy. Whatever the case may be, I don't think that should appear in Mr. St. Denis' amendment.

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Alexandre Roger): We've already sent the "blues" of the meeting. The only problem is that they are unofficial, untranslated documents of the House of Commons.

[*English*]

It's up to the committee whether or not to send the blues out to the ombudsman. The documents are made public as official transcripts

when they've been edited and translated, and they are available on the website for only the public part of the meeting. Whatever is in camera is kept in my office, and no one has access to it. So it is your decision whether you want to send the blues—the unedited and unofficial and untranslated version—to the ombudsman.

The Chair: Just to be fair, committee, they're in a sense the poorer cousin of the public ones. I don't think it makes sense to send the blues, because they have to go through edits and what not, and then it's a question, really, of whether the ombudsman wishes to access them or whether or not we want to send them. It's a push-pull kind of question.

Right now I'll consider this to be extraneous to the motion, because I think we'll just leave the motion as it stands. Is that okay? Maybe we'll discuss it at a later time.

Mr. Sweet.

Mr. David Sweet: I have the suspicion that with a very qualified communications director, who was just introduced to us, that they're now onto this—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh.

Mr. David Sweet: —and they may very well just go to the site occasionally and be kept abreast of things. That might very well suffice. Certainly, since Mr. Stoffer was the one who introduced her, he knows the capability is there.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: [*Inaudible—Editor*]

Mr. David Sweet: I was talking about access and communications, sir.

The Chair: They have been notified.

I don't see any other speakers to Mr. St. Denis' motion.

I don't have all the amendments before me, but basically I think it's to switch the mention of post-traumatic stress disorder to psychological injury, with PTSD in brackets afterward. I don't know what grammatical modifications Mr. St. Denis has.

Mr. Brent St. Denis: If you want, in the second last line, we could put, "he has considered", as opposed to "he considers". And, "Ombudsman" has an *a*. They are pretty minor.

The Chair: Yes. Okay. I think everybody gets the general gist of that.

All right, then, to the vote on the motion.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: I think that pretty much wraps up our meeting. Thank you all.

The meeting is adjourned.

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