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Chair

Mr. David Sweet

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• (1530)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC)): Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen.

We have the good fortune of having Minister Greg Thompson with us today, as well as Deputy Minister Suzanne Tining. They will have the opportunity to make presentations.

Will the deputy minister be making a presentation as well, Minister Thompson?

Hon. Greg Thompson (Minister of Veterans Affairs): I'm not sure.

Ms. Suzanne Tining (Deputy Minister, Department of Veterans Affairs): Not today, but on Wednesday.

Hon. Greg Thompson: Not today. It depends on whether I get into trouble or not, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: I don't suspect that will happen.

In our routine motions, we reaffirmed that the witnesses have ten minutes to present. Then we'll go by predetermined rotation with questions afterwards. Seeing that we have quorum, then, Minister Thompson, you can begin at your pleasure.

Hon. Greg Thompson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I'll begin by congratulating you on your elevation to the chair, because you were a valued member of the committee in the last Parliament. Congratulations.

As for all the new members, it's the first time for most of us, I think, that we've been at the table together. It's the first time for most of us, but not all of us, with the exception of Roger and Albina.

Albina, I think you're subbing for Judy, who couldn't make it today. Again, thank you for being here.

As well, Peter is an old friend from Atlantic Canada.

I'll get right at it, Mr. Chairman. Then, of course, we are going to go to questions and responses. I think this will probably take me about ten minutes. Hopefully, we'll get through it in no longer than that.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and good afternoon to all honourable members of this committee.

Of all the work we do as members of Parliament, there are few things I can think of that are more important than what we're doing here for our nation's truest heroes.

I forgot to point out my parliamentary secretary, Greg Kerr, from Nova Scotia, Mr. Chairman. I got myself in trouble immediately. I apologize for that.

We are helping to make sure that this grateful nation repays the great debt we owe our veterans and their families. We all agree on that. We are helping to make sure Canadians remember how ordinary men and women did truly extraordinary things in defending our shared values of freedom, democracy, and the rule of law.

British Prime Minister David Lloyd George captured all of this perfectly in a speech he gave just days after the end of the First World War. Some of you have probably heard me quote this before, but it's worth repeating. It's one of my favourites. "What is our task?", the Prime Minister asked some 90 years ago. Of course, he answered his question by saying, "To make Britain a fit place for our heroes to live in". That remains our challenge today, and our duty: to continue to make sure Canada is a fit place for our heroes to live in.

I want to congratulate each and every one of you for accepting your part in meeting this responsibility by serving on this committee.

Again, David, in my formal remarks I want to congratulate you on your election as chairman, and Peter and Judy, the new vice-chairs, as well, and I thank Roger Gaudet as a returning member of this committee.

I welcome all of you who are starting here for the first time.

You will find in the months ahead that this a truly unique committee, a committee where partisan politics takes a back seat to doing what is right and good. This is a committee that quickly teaches us how few things can unite politicians the way our veterans can. You will feel truly rewarded in spirit and in soul for the contributions you can make here.

Of course we may disagree about how we can best serve our veterans, and we may have slightly different visions, but in the end we all share the same goals: to make sure our veterans and their families receive the care and the recognition they've earned and that they deserve. For that, I want you to know that you have my full support and cooperation. Together, we can make sure Canada is worthy of its heroes.

Before I go any further with my prepared remarks, I'd like to take a moment to introduce you to Suzanne Tining, Deputy Minister of Veterans Affairs.

Thank you, Suzanne, for being with us today. And of course thanks to the returning members of the committee.

Madam Ting, as you all know, has distinguished herself for her own commitment to serving and honouring our veterans and their families. She has provided steady help and guidance. I thank you for that, Suzanne, and for being with us today.

Mr. Chairman, the Department of Veterans Affairs was created 65 years ago with a straightforward mandate: to repay the nation's debt of gratitude for service to the country. Since then, Canada has seen its share of good times and bad. Canadian priorities have changed with the passing years, but never has our pride in our veterans wavered. I truly believe that never has a government done more for our veterans and their families than we have. Since taking office three years ago this month, our government has consistently stood by our veterans, and we have done it in real and lasting ways.

For example, in our first three years we have budgeted more than \$1.6 billion in new spending for our veterans and the services and programs they can count on. Just two months into our first mandate, we implemented the new Veterans Charter and we set aside \$740 million in new money to ensure the success of this sweeping new way of helping our veterans and their families.

• (1535)

The next year we approved even more new money for other veterans priorities and things our veterans have been waiting a long time for. We appointed Canada's first veterans ombudsman; we adopted a veterans bill of rights, and we increased staffing to make sure we could meet the commitments contained in the bill of rights. We also announced our plan for doubling the number of operational stress injury clinics we operate across the country. This year we will see the plan fully implemented, with a total of ten operational stress injury clinics.

As well, we used our second budget to hire peer counsellors for military families. Under our operational stress injuries social support program we are helping struggling military families by providing them with trained counsellors who have endured the same things they're going through. Veterans will tell you that these efforts are making a difference. They are improving their quality of life and making them feel whole. We haven't stopped there. Last year we invested more than \$302 million over five years to extend support to survivors of war veterans. This investment included the expansion of the VIP program, the veterans independence program.

Now, in the midst of global economic crisis, when every dollar counts, we are still delivering the best possible service to Canada's veterans in a fiscally responsible manner. You'll see that reflected in our supplementary estimates, in which we put forward three items totalling \$1.8 million. The three items are the sale of the Senneville Pavilion site at \$600,000, the allocation of \$1.1 million in advertising funds to the Veterans Week Vignette, and \$100,000 from the Department of Canadian Heritage to Veterans Affairs for a partnership with the Dominion Institute in the delivery of the Memory Project Speakers Bureau.

Last year, as part of our strategic review, Veterans Affairs Canada also examined all of its programs to identify where improvements and efficiencies could be made while maintaining the level of service and benefits our veterans have come to expect. These increased efficiencies, which were essentially improved administrative measures, will help our government continue to provide first-rate care,

treatment, and support of our veterans and to commemorate their achievements and sacrifices.

With every step we take and with every improvement we make, we are giving our veterans and their families more choice, more options, and more hope of living out their lives with respect, comfort, dignity, and honour. With the veterans independence program, for example, we are helping more veterans and their survivors to remain healthy and independent in their own homes and communities. That's what they keep telling us they want and what they keep demonstrating with their own personal choices.

At the same time, we are responding to our newest veterans through a living charter that meets and adjusts to their changing needs. Since its implementation three years ago, the new Veterans Charter has helped more than 12,600 Canadian Forces veterans and their families make the transition from military careers to civilian life. Disability awards have been provided to more than 10,500 veterans, and approximately 3,000 veterans have been approved for rehabilitation assistance. More families are being helped than ever before.

Veterans Affairs is also putting more of our people where they are needed to provide the best one-on-one care to our veterans. We have nearly 40 offices across the country, and we're expanding our presence on many Canadian Forces bases, thus helping to narrow what some call the "transitional gap" that used to exist between Veterans Affairs and the Department of National Defence. The result is that we're giving our care and services to more veterans.

I'd like to share with you one simple example. Since 2006 close to 400 veterans have received career counselling and help finding a job through our new job placement program. We know it's working. I recently heard the story of a young 33-year-old individual from Edmonton who had decided to leave the Canadian Forces last year. The job placement program helped him determine the right career path and gave him the training tools that he needed for his job search. Staff provided him with the encouragement and focus to stay optimistic throughout this transition. Today this former soldier is happily employed with a large waste management company in western Canada, and he readily credits our job placement program for that.

• (1540)

This is how we've changed the way we operate. This is how we improved Canada's approach, by being there sooner for our men and women, getting them more information faster about the benefits and services available to them, and intervening sooner when they need help. In short, we're doing everything we possibly can to provide our heroes with the support they need when they need it and where they need it.

Is it perfect? Of course not. Is there more work to be done? Of course, and I'm counting on you for your ideas and insights. As I often say, we can never do enough to repay the great debt we owe our veterans and their families.

The last thing I'd like to talk about in my remarks is remembrance. As I am sure you have noticed, Canada's pride in our veterans has reached an all-time high. At each November 11 ceremony, we're seeing record crowds here in Ottawa and across the country, and we're seeing it throughout the year with more commemorative ceremonies drawing even larger numbers. We can all feel good about that, because it's our solemn duty to make sure future generations never forget why we live in the best country in the world.

We'll be doing our part again this year with commemorative events and ceremonies such as the unveiling of the ice sculpture, which will mark the 60th anniversary of NATO, on Thursday in Ottawa. We will also be in France this spring to mark the 65th anniversary of D-Day and the Normandy campaign, and we will remember the liberation of Belgium and the Italian campaign this year as well. We will join the countless organizations and communities across the country for commemorative events held throughout 2009 to honour our heroes, past and present.

There is a Chinese proverb that explains why these commemorative events are so important. One of our veterans shared it with me while we were in France last fall to mark the 90th anniversary of the end of the First World War. It states, "Tell me, and I'll forget. Show me, and I may not remember. Involve me, and I'll understand." As Canadians, we need to understand. We need to remember that we are the inheritors of a remarkable country and a remarkable way of life made possible by truly remarkable men and women. This is our heritage, a heritage we can cherish and a heritage we must do everything we can to protect and honour, lest we forget.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister Thompson.

I ask you to excuse me. I should have mentioned right at the beginning that Minister Thompson will have to leave at 5 p.m., so we'll make the most of our time right now.

Ms. Foote, please.

Ms. Judy Foote (Random—Burin—St. George's, Lib.): Thank you, Minister Thompson, for coming in to be with us this afternoon. Let me say at the outset how pleased I am to be a member of this particular committee. Being from Newfoundland and Labrador, we have had our share—in fact, more than our share—of people who have served in various wars. We know, in fact, what it's like to have many, many veterans in our province, and we certainly try to do everything we can to ensure that they are treated fairly and remembered for the part they played in trying to secure the freedom of so many throughout the world.

I have a question for the minister about the Veterans Review and Appeal Board. It's been said that they have a very busy workload, with some 7,000 claims. I'm wondering if you can give me some sense of what the backlog is and how long it is taking for a claim to be processed.

Hon. Greg Thompson: We have reduced that time lag, Ms. Foote. I believe the average claim, if my memory serves me right on

this—and that's why I have the deputy with me—is a turnaround time of 29 days. So I'm off to a pretty good start.

There were a number of vacancies that weren't filled when we took office three years ago. I'm not saying it's anyone's fault, because those things just happen. But we're almost up to a full contingent now, and the turnaround time is less than it used to be. When we took office, I think we had about 7,000 cases backed up, so that's been reduced as well. We have made progress on it, and I think the people we've appointed are top-quality people. That's saying nothing about the people who had been appointed in the past, because I think even under the previous government there was more of a qualifying sense of who should be on that board. It was all part of the selection process, if you will. So we do have some good quality people on there and we're getting the kinds of results we wanted to get.

● (1545)

Ms. Judy Foote: Another question that comes to mind—I was reading about this in the local media recently—is with respect to the \$24,000 lump-sum payment. I'm wondering what the overall reaction has been from the veterans to that.

Hon. Greg Thompson: I think on this one, you're referring to the \$24,000 that is the atomic testing veterans'—

Ms. Judy Foote: That's right.

Hon. Greg Thompson: —*ex gratia* payment.

Again, that was an issue that was.... I shouldn't say it was more of a DND issue than veterans, because obviously it does impact on veterans, but it was one of those complicated cases that lay around for a number of years, and successive governments didn't deal with it. An *ex gratia* payment was something we came out with I think last summer or last spring. I think it was very fair. There were no conditions attached to the payment, as you well know. It's one of those issues where men and women were asked to do something, and I guess you could argue that if it were done over again, they would never have been asked to do what they had to do. You could argue that the \$24,000 was highly justified. It was a tax-free, one-time payment.

On top of that, that has never stopped...because we don't want to confuse the *ex gratia* payment with the ongoing disability pensions that are awarded by Veterans Affairs. We have awarded those and continue to award those, so this was on top of the pension. That pension process still can apply to those individuals if, for example, they served and have a disability that can be directly related to their service. We do have a list of those, which I actually went over today just to brief myself on what some of those conditions might be—certain skin cancers, lung conditions, and so on.

Those pensions, Ms. Foote, are still being recognized and still being awarded by Veterans Affairs on top of the \$24,000 *ex gratia*.

Ms. Judy Foote: Do you have a number in terms of how many veterans are receiving the lump sum?

Hon. Greg Thompson: I don't have that number at the top of my head, but I'm sure we'll have it before the meeting ends. Is that ongoing? I'm trying to think of when that process unfolds. On Agent Orange, for example, we have a deadline for applications, and because...let's see, what's it saying here? We announced it right at the time, September 2, 2008, and it says we will do the outreach thing. So it doesn't appear there's a timeline attached to it, and we don't have a sense of the numbers here either, but we do have those. We'll get an update and make sure we get back to you on that.

Ms. Judy Foote: Just one other point—

Hon. Greg Thompson: We'll have to check with DND, because basically the program was something they were challenged with devising and coming up with. In fact, when that proposal was taken to cabinet, it was DND that brought it forward, not the Minister of Veterans Affairs, as opposed to with Agent Orange, which is just the reverse of that.

• (1550)

Ms. Judy Foote: You talked about the number of operational stress injury clinics across the country and said the plan is to see ten of those implemented across the country. Is that one in each province? Where are those located?

Hon. Greg Thompson: No, it's not one in every province, although most, if not all, of those provinces that have a base are in that mix. What we did on those is that we have doubled the number, and I think most of them are up and running now. I think I'm going to Vancouver next week to officially open a new site in Vancouver. Of course, I was down to Montreal about a month ago to announce a residential treatment OSI centre in Montreal. The locations are Fredericton, New Brunswick, obviously because of Base Gagetown; we have the cities of Quebec and Montreal—the out-patient clinic at Ste. Anne's as well as the residential treatment centre at Ste. Anne's. We have one here in Ottawa; London, Ontario; Winnipeg; Edmonton—which is not operational yet—and Calgary. I think the official opening of the one in Vancouver will be next week. That's up and running but not officially opened. So we're making pretty good progress, and we've got really eight out of ten up and running.

Also, in addition to that, Ms. Foote, because I don't think I mentioned it in my opening remarks, DND has five stand-alone clinics, centres, or what they call operational trauma and stress support centres, that they operate on their own. So we've got a total of 15.

Ms. Judy Foote: How is the location—

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Foote. You're actually one minute over.

Ms. Judy Foote: Okay. Thank you.

The Chair: Monsieur André, for the Bloc Québécois.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Guy André (Berthier—Maskinongé, BQ): Good day, Minister, Ms. Tining.

This is my first time ever serving on this committee. I'm getting myself up to speed on the important veterans file and I'm starting to pour over the background material. The Montreal area is home to Ste. Anne's Hospital. Because of the situation in Afghanistan, the number of wounded veterans in need of care is increasing. Does your

budget provide for an increase in services at Ste. Anne's for these veterans? I'm also aware that you have announced some major renovations to this facility. Are these renovations in line with the timetable and the budget announced?

I've read in the various documents that post-traumatic stress syndrome is a major problem. I personally lost a friend several years ago. He took his own life after a military mission. You provide services to victims of post-traumatic stress syndrome. Are victims now acknowledging more readily that they are suffering from this disorder? Have services been decentralized in order to make them more accessible to Quebeckers and Canadians?

[*English*]

Hon. Greg Thompson: Thank you. Those are good questions.

I hope I answer them all satisfactorily, Mr. Chairman, because they're complicated questions, only in the sense that there's a lot of detail surrounding much of this.

Ste. Anne's Hospital is the only veterans hospital in Canada. It's the only one left. There are about 416 beds in the hospital. It's long-term care for veterans. It has gone through major renovations. In fact, the first question that I had on the floor of the House of Commons as a minister three years ago was on the renovations. The Government of Canada invested well over \$100 million in that hospital.

As well, a lot of the work, the cutting-edge work, that we do on post-traumatic stress disorder is done at that hospital. That's really the centre of excellence for this type of work that's carried on throughout the country.

In terms of Quebec itself, we do have an OSI clinic in the city of Quebec and we also have one, obviously, in Montreal at Ste. Anne's. The only residential treatment clinic that we have, a resident clinic, is at Ste. Anne's. Truly, that's really the heart and centre of everything we do in operational stress injury. That's where the expertise lies. A lot of the cutting edge programs that we deliver have actually been designed at Ste. Anne's. It has an important role to play in the delivery of that service to our clients.

What part of the question, Mr. Chairman, have I not answered? I just want to make sure that I've answered.

• (1555)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Guy André: You've provided partial answers to my questions.

I pointed out that because of the current conflict in Afghanistan, many people would be needing care. You stated that there were 416 beds at Ste. Anne's. However, are there enough beds in all? Has demand increased because of the mission to Afghanistan? Are you anticipating an increase in the budget? Do the services provided meet the needs of patients?

[English]

Hon. Greg Thompson: Yes, the service is being provided to that military family, the unit that needs that service. That's why we very early on doubled the number of operational stress injury clinics across the country. We could see that need ramping up.

Actually, if you take a look at the number of veterans who receive a pension as a result of psychological injury, there has been a steep increase over the years. It's not all related to Afghanistan. A lot of it is early detection and knowing more about the disease than we did in the past and erasing the stigma that was present within our military, in terms of recognizing a problem.

Today, I think we have 11,000 clients who have received a pension as a result of a psychiatric condition, and that includes post-traumatic stress disorder. Out of that 11,000, the number who suffer with post-traumatic are well over 7,000. When you ask what the difference would be, some of the others could be drug addiction, alcoholism, or it could simply be a psychiatric condition.

It is a problem we recognize early on, and we really have dedicated a lot of resources to it.

The Chair: Merci, Monsieur André.

Mr. Stoffer.

Mr. Peter Stoffer (Sackville—Eastern Shore, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And Minister and Deputy Minister, thank you for coming today.

I'm going to start by saying that if the government does plan to move ahead to make Beechwood a national cemetery—a national site—then we would definitely support that initiative. I think that would be very helpful.

Also, thank you to the department for the Dominion Institute's funding to bring veterans to the schools. I think that's very important, and you should be thanked for that as well.

Okay, that's me being the nice guy.

Minister, I've noticed a trend within the Conservative Party.... And not all of these comments are attributed to you; in fact just one is, but it's rather disturbing.

You're right when you say we owe them a great debt of gratitude, but when platitudes or words are said, you expect them to be fulfilled. In June 2005, you asked Minister Graham, the Minister of Defence, when the government was going to compensate all the victims of Agent Orange. Later on that month you asked whether the public would not best be served by an independent and public inquiry on Agent Orange. The Prime Minister said in 2006 that the Conservatives would stand up for full compensation for persons exposed to defoliant spraying from 1956 to 1984. We know that a package looked at those who qualified and applied prior to April of this year, for 1966 and 1967 only, which is what the Liberals had offered.

You also indicated the Prime Minister said that Joyce Carter—in fact all widows of World War II and Korean veterans, regardless of when the veteran passed away—would receive the VIP immediately upon your forming government. Two years later, money came into

the budget that would have offered it to less than 30% of those, and even then under new criteria of a disability tax credit or certain income. That's not what was said.

Also, recently it was indicated that the Conservative Party, in its 2007 platform, said it would disband the Veterans Review and Appeal Board and replace it with qualified medical and military members capable of adjudicating appeals on an informed basis. We notice that Angela Vautour, former member of Parliament—one of ours, who jumped to the PC—is now a member of that board.

Lastly, in September Mr. Harper said to a bunch of Polish veterans—and you have a copy of it—that if elected, they would make sure that allied and Commonwealth veterans who fought with us and have been here for ten years will receive the Canadian war allowance. In my conversations with those Polish veterans, and the average age is 86.... It wasn't in the economic statement, in the budget, and it's not in the estimates, that I can find. So my question to you, first of all, is where is the promise for the allied veterans? They're 86. We already know that several of them have passed away.

Number two, how many total veterans do we actually have in the country—not what DVA serves, but the total number of veterans, their spouses, and RCMP veterans? When we had the Australian government here, they said they serviced 440,000 individuals, with 2,300 people in their administration. We have over 3,800 in our administration serving close to 212,000 people. I just wanted to get that in.

My last question is on the advisory group. Sean Bruyey asked me to ask you this. Is it possible to get the names of that group?

Thank you, sir. There's more, but I don't have much time.

• (1600)

Hon. Greg Thompson: Everything but the kitchen sink, right, sir?

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Just about. I have more.

Hon. Greg Thompson: Let me go through some of these very quickly.

What we did on Agent Orange was very fair and it was very generous. We acted where previous governments refused to act. We're going into the years 1966-67. I mean, those were the only years when unregulated chemicals were sprayed.

We depended on the work that the Liberals put in place in their task force. In fact, if you take a look at the task force and what Dr. Furlong was saying, no one would have received an *ex gratia* payment at all, period; we would have done nothing, as previous governments did. What we did was fair and it was generous. We did exactly what we said we would do and we lived up to it.

In terms of Mrs. Carter, I met personally with Mrs. Carter, as did the Prime Minister. I really take the word of the whip for the Liberal Party, Mr. Cuzner, who said it was a good start to fixing the VI program, the VIP, and I believe it is a good start.

That's not to say our work is finished, because it's not finished. We've enhanced the program. We'll continue to enhance the program and bring benefits in. The widows we brought in were the ones who waited the longest and needed it most, Mr. Stoffer. We targeted the people who waited the longest and needed it most. That's who we addressed.

In terms of the allied veterans, the Prime Minister and I have stated that's the commitment we'll honour. Normally the life of a Parliament is four years, but in the past four years you've been here, whether it's a Liberal government or a Conservative government, name one time when the NDP actually stood in its place in the House and supported veterans. You guys talk a good line.

Personally, you talk a good line, Peter, and I don't doubt your personal commitment to our veterans, but you never put your vote where your mouth is. The truth is—

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Well, Mr. Chairman—

Hon. Greg Thompson: —that you have a terrible habit of doing that—

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Mr. Minister, if I may say so—

Hon. Greg Thompson: —and you've done it every single budget that we've been part and process of.

•(1605)

Mr. Peter Stoffer: On a point of order, Mr. Minister, all I can do is go by your exact words. You said “all”.

Hon. Greg Thompson: Well, I go by your vote.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: No, sir. You—

Hon. Greg Thompson: You're interpreting my words, but your vote speaks legends. You never—

Mr. Peter Stoffer: When you say “all widows”—

Hon. Greg Thompson —stand in your place to vote for veterans.

Support us.

It's just like the budget.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: No, sir.

When he's being incorrect, Mr. Chairman, that's wrong.

Hon. Greg Thompson: You made a conscious decision that you were going to vote down the budget before you saw it. You actually had a disagreement with your own leader—

The Chair: Mr. Minister—

Hon. Greg Thompson: —who said, “Well, possibly Mr. Stoffer's wrong”, but you can't do that.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: I'm not talking about the budget, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: Minister Thompson, please.

Hon. Greg Thompson: You can't do that. You can't actually talk about supporting veterans and then go into the House and vote against them. You can't do that.

The Chair: Minister Thompson.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Mr. Minister—

The Chair: Mr. Stoffer, first off, your time was well, well up.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Okay. Yes, I understand.

The Chair: Secondly, the point of order is a piece of debate. The minister was answering your questions.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Okay. I'll get back to it.

The Chair: If you have any more detail, Minister, to refer to those questions and to answer, then go ahead. If not, I'll go to the next one.

Hon. Greg Thompson: The only thing I want to add, Mr. Chair, is that I ask every member here, regardless of what side of the House they're on, to examine their voting record in terms of support of our men and women in uniform and our veterans. It's dismal. It's one they should be ashamed of.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Minister.

Mr. Kerr.

Mr. Greg Kerr (West Nova, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I was kind of enjoying that engagement a little bit. I guess I got distracted.

First, I do want to say that it certainly is an honour and a pleasure to be the parliamentary secretary. It's quite a learning curve. Certainly, unless you're a part of it, you don't realize just how much goes into it and how many people are served and supported by Parliament and certainly by the department. I'm delighted to be there.

I'd also think you might see that the member from Sackville may even go our way in the last vote. He still has that opportunity. I know his interest is there, for sure.

I just want to change it back a bit. I noticed that this topic came up twice. I've had a chance to do the research on it and it's quite an amazing thing. It's the fact of Ste. Anne's Hospital.

I was wondering if perhaps what we're looking at—and you covered quite a bit of it when you gave your first answer, Minister—is the fact that it is providing that kind of unique service, not just for the obvious returning vets and those who need it immediately. There are a lot of other elements.

I was wondering, Minister Thompson, if you want to expand a bit on the kinds of activities going forward that you see taking place at Ste. Anne's. I'm hoping we'll all go there to visit sometime before the year's out and see it at first hand. From what I know of it, and I haven't been there, it's quite an incredible initiative. Perhaps a bit more on what its intent is might be helpful at this time.

Hon. Greg Thompson: Thank you, Greg.

I want to clarify one thing in Mr. Stoffer's remarks. This isn't personal—it's this thing we go back and forth on. I don't question his commitment to veterans as an individual, because he does remarkable things with the veterans community in his home town. I'll admit that anywhere—and I've been to some of those events. But I'll just tell you that the rubber never hits the road in his party. He belongs to a party that has a dismal record on support of our veterans and our men and women in uniform, so that's the point I'm making. I don't question his personal commitment for a minute; I'm just questioning where his party is going on these issues. One of these days I want to see him break party ranks and stand up and support our men and women in the House of Commons with his vote.

Now I'm going to move on to the other one. Ste. Anne's is on the cutting edge with some of the programs they've developed, and they're ongoing. They have an impact on our national delivery of these programs, because the expertise really does rest down there at Ste. Anne's. It's sort of the crown jewel of our operation, when it comes to operational stress injury and post-traumatic stress disorder, in the work they're doing. That work is ongoing and the research is ongoing. We're very proud of what they're doing. In fact, we were down there less than a month ago, and I believe they will be up and running with the residential treatment facility in November. Is that right, Suzanne? Then families can actually be there on site while the family member is receiving treatment. We're looking forward to that, because the veterans communities have asked for that and it's something we're delivering on.

One of the things we should do—I think the committee did it in the last Parliament—is visit Ste. Anne's. It would be worthwhile for the committee to go down to hear from some of the professionals on the ground, because they truly are committed to what they're doing and have done a tremendous job. We can be very proud of them.

• (1610)

Mr. Greg Kerr: Thank you very much.

I'll share the rest of my time with Rob Clarke, if that's okay.

The Chair: Mr. Clarke, you have almost three minutes.

Mr. Rob Clarke (Desnethé—Missinippi—Churchill River, CPC): I'd like to congratulate the chair for winning the nomination for the seat, and thank the minister for attending here this afternoon.

I am a veteran of the RCMP. I served in the RCMP for 18 years before I retired due to my political aspirations. I participated in a program for Veterans Affairs with great interest, so I know how much the forces need the support of this committee.

First, how many clients participate in this program—a general number overall—from the military and the RCMP?

Second, when making changes to the programs, what do we do with regard to consultation sessions, what groups meet, and how often do these consultations take place?

Hon. Greg Thompson: Thank you, Rob.

Through the client list here, I do have specific numbers for you, and we can break them down. We have 219,000 clients. That's including the RCMP disability pension awards. We have 176,000 disability pension awards. About another 8,000 would be the RCMP's share of that caseload, if you will. As well, 103,000

survivors receive the VIP program. So that's a snapshot of our veterans population.

With regard to the average age of a new force veteran coming into the system, I always say it's the age of 34, but it could be 36. The average age of a World War II veteran now is up to 85, soon to be 86. Of course, that was one of the reasons we redesigned some of our programs when we went to the new Veterans Charter, which was introduced by the Liberal government, passed by the previous government, and implemented by ours. That's one of the reasons we moved to that.

In terms of the programs offered, Rob, it's wide and it's varied. Again, I do know that a lot of the emphasis on the new veterans coming into the system very much is on the post-traumatic stress disorder. Those numbers really have escalated in the last number of years. I think Veterans Affairs has responded well to it. We do have a lot of those peer support groups around the country where our veterans can get in and share thoughts, and families can get together.

A lot of that goes on both on and off the bases. Many of our clinics are walk-in. The stigma of walking into a doctor's office or a psychiatrist's office doesn't exist, because they're off-base and many of them are housed in the most unusual places. We're making every effort we can so that when a veteran is suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, they can receive that type of treatment in the kind of privacy that they deserve, and eliminate the kind of difficulties that often have been created in the past as a result of receiving that treatment.

I often say that in our society as a whole, anyone who suffers from mental illness suffers in silence. I think we've made great gains, and DND has as well, in bringing the reality out in the public eye. It's more accepted now than it was in the past. People actually seek treatment. There's more of a recognition by the government that we can do more, and we will continue to do more and closely monitor what's going on.

When you compare the numbers in some of the other jurisdictions around the world with the numbers in Canada, you can see that we are blessed with a pretty healthy group of men and women in uniform. I do know that we were talking earlier today about suicide rates in the U.S. military. It's an extremely high number, a frighteningly high number. Our number in the Canadian military, from the statistics that I've received anyway, indicates that suicide within the Canadian military, in the veterans group as a whole—that larger military family, I might say, as a better way of putting it—is actually less than the Canadian average.

I think this is as a result of a number of things that we're doing, and just the quality of the men and women who put on the Canadian uniform. I'd like to believe that some of it is the ongoing work that Veterans Affairs has done with our client base, not to mention National Defence itself.

• (1615)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Hon. Greg Thompson: Excuse me, Mr. Chairman, but I should just add here, if you don't mind, that one of the things that DND is doing—and Peter would probably be aware of this more than some of us because of where he lives—is retaining many of its soldiers. If you had an injury or a disability where you're out of the military immediately, they're really emphasizing training and retraining to utilize the talent that they have. I think that feeling of being wanted and needed and the fact that I was injured on the job or wounded on the job doesn't mean I'm no longer a soldier.

General Hillier went to great lengths to make that change. I think it's been implemented well. I think there's been a lot of positive feedback within the military of the feeling that you're not just another soldier, you're important to us and we want to be there for you, not just for the short haul but the long haul. It's made a big difference on the outlook of many of our men and women in uniform.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. Thank you, Mr. Clarke.

That ends our first round. Because of the fullness and robustness of the answers, we've consumed quite a bit of time, so we'll move right on to the second round now of five minutes.

Madam Guarnieri.

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

Let me add my congratulations to your new position. I know it's been my experience that this committee works diligently to enhance veterans' benefits. Congratulations.

I'd like to pick up on a point that my erudite friend here, Monsieur André, raised earlier. Minister, the government has committed to maintaining the Kandahar mission to 2011. With the current rate of losses, we can expect to conclude this mission with a very substantial number of veterans suffering continuing physical injuries and operational stress injuries.

What does your department project in terms of the total number of disability claims arising from the Kandahar mission by 2011? Where are there capacity shortfalls in terms of serving their needs?

Hon. Greg Thompson: Albina, that's one where, again, looking at what we have done in our OSI clinics, the new Veterans Charter really speaks to that issue. It was on your watch that it was introduced and passed on the floor of the House of Commons. I don't think there's any question in the minds of any of us that it was the right thing to do. We were blessed to be here in the government to implement it.

It was set up in such a way to respond to that on an ongoing basis. In my opening remarks I talked about the millions of dollars that we put in to respond to the needs of the new veterans coming into the system. It was a conscious decision made by the government at the time, carried on by us. We're living in a different world today from what existed post-World War II.

Again, when you take a look at the \$1.6 billion that we budgeted over and above the last budget that you had, a lot of that is going to the very need we've identified, to those new veterans coming into the system, Albina. I think we've responded well to that need.

In terms of the implementation of the charter—and if we want to get into the numbers, we have them available here—basically, our projections and the projections of the previous government were pretty well right on in terms of what we were expecting to see in these more difficult missions, whether it's Afghanistan or some other place.

• (1620)

Hon. Albina Guarnieri: The difference being, though, when I was a minister, we hadn't had a single casualty yet. So I guess my question really goes towards capacity and long-term planning. Obviously, serving soldiers want to be assured that the capacity is there to provide them with the care that they need, despite massive increases in casualties over the last three years.

I wonder if the minister has developed any relationships with the United States providers to deliver prompt care or treatment to Canadian veterans if capacity north of the border becomes stretched. In other words, are there contingencies if demand in the coming years accelerates beyond capacity?

Hon. Greg Thompson: Well, one of the biggest differences between our system and the American system is that in the American system they rely on veterans hospitals to deliver the health care, while in our system we depend on the universal health care system to deliver most of the services—not all of the services—to our veteran clients. So there's a fundamental difference between how they deliver their service and how we deliver ours.

We committed ourselves to the Afghan mission in 2002. I don't know the breakdown off the top of my head. You're saying that most, if not all, of the casualties are a result of the last three years. I'm not sure if that statistic is correct or not; it very well could be correct. But the truth is that we have responded, I think, very positively to the number of men and women and their families who need our support. And, again, we had unanimous support in the House of Commons for the changes we brought about.

I think the numbers are what we pretty well predicted they would be. Obviously, as we go forward into 2011...we never know how the world is going to unfold as we approach that date, but Veterans Affairs is prepared. The client base has been pretty predictable, and we put the financial resources into the department to deal with it.

Hon. Albina Guarnieri: The question is, will there be additional contingencies, if necessary?

Hon. Greg Thompson: We'll do whatever it takes, Albina, to be there for our men and women in uniform. If, for some reason, we need more financial resources to do the job we're expected to do for our men and women in uniform, I could sit here and tell you that we'll have those dollars to do that.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Thank you, Madam Guarnieri.

Mr. Lobb.

Mr. Ben Lobb (Huron—Bruce, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I would like to congratulate you on your election as chair. I know people know you'll do a great job, as will I.

I'd like to thank Minister Thompson for the hard work he's done in supporting the veterans in his time as the Minister of Veterans Affairs. In particular, the veterans independence program and it's expansion I know was a very popular and well-appreciated program in my riding, and many people throughout the legions in my riding surely appreciate that.

I would like to point out that Minister Thompson is also a graduate of St. Thomas University. A cousin of mine was a scholarship athlete out there and played on the hockey team, so I see we have one thing in common.

The question I have for Minister Thompson is this. As a young person, I'm interested in what initiatives you are taking or the department is taking to engage youth in activities of remembrance.

I know in our riding I was really amazed at the cenotaph presentation on Remembrance Day, at the large numbers, and members of the Legion did comment on how there's been an upsurge in response and in support of Remembrance Day. I was just curious how the department and yourself are working to have youth included in this initiative.

• (1625)

Hon. Greg Thompson: Thank you, Ben, and congratulations on your appointment to the committee.

That is a big part of what we do. In fact, I've talked about the sort of spike in interest in Remembrance Day. More people are showing up. I think there are a number of reasons for it. I guess it's because we know that our men and women are on tough missions in Afghanistan and in other troubled parts of the world. I think we have an understanding of how troubled the world really is and of how we depend on these people for the very freedoms we have.

I think some of that might flow naturally because of the kind of world we're living in today. In terms of Veterans Affairs, I think we work more closely with schools today. The information we provide to schools and teachers to use in the classroom I think speaks well of what we do with our young people. Of course, when we go on some of these pilgrimages, as we often refer to them, overseas, and do commemorative events overseas, we always make sure that a number of school children are part of it.

I don't want to get his name wrong, but we have one teacher in the Ontario region who does just incredible work. I think the deputy has his name at hand. I know that his first name is David.... David Robinson is an example. There was Vimy Ridge. Truly thousands of young people, young Canadians, went to Vimy Ridge to take part in that commemorative event, and he's doing an event in Italy this year, and there is more to come.

I think it's a combination of many different things, but a lot of it is just getting educational materials to the schools. Years ago I was a school teacher, and the amount of information that would flow to the schools from Veterans Affairs was almost non-existent. I know that if I say that I'll probably be in trouble with the previous ministers from back a generation or two.

We distribute 20,000 Veterans Week information packages to schools across the country, so it's pretty significant. We have a number of different projects we fund, as well, in the schools. The

Dominion Institute, as one of the members, Peter, mentioned, does tremendous work across the country. In fact, one of the best events I've ever been to with the Dominion Institute, which the Prime Minister attended, was just before Christmas, when they had an event with some of the young people in the schools in Saint John, New Brunswick.

That is some of what we do. I guess we can always say that we could do more, but it sure is gratifying when you go to these small communities on Remembrance Day and see the kinds of people showing up. I think the member of Parliament for Saint John, Rodney Weston, told me that something like 8,000 people in Saint John, New Brunswick, a city of fewer than 100,000 people, showed up at Harbour Station for their November 11 ceremony. They're just unbelievable numbers, exceeding some of those in our larger cities. I think it's a clear indication that reaching out to the schools makes a difference. I think we can be proud of what we're doing in that regard.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Mr. Lobb, that was the expiration of your time.

Now we'll go to Monsieur Gaudet.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Roger Gaudet (Montcalm, BQ): Thank you to our new Chair.

Congratulations, Mr. Thompson, on being re-elected.

How much has been allocated to us in the 2009-2010 budget? The Library of Parliament briefing notes make no mention of this figure.

[*English*]

Hon. Greg Thompson: The budget is over \$3 billion and counting. I think it's \$3.4 billion in total. Of course, then we can break that down, Roger, between direct benefits to veterans and the cost of running the department. So \$3.4 billion in total is the number.

• (1630)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Roger Gaudet: According to the Library of Parliament briefing notes, the Main Estimates total \$3.397 billion, which represents an increase of only \$3 million for fiscal year 2009-2010. In light of the situation in Afghanistan and the likelihood of an influx of new patients, similar to what occurred during the conflicts in Bosnia and the Gulf, and in view of the opening of 10 new clinics to treat post-traumatic stress syndrome, the \$3 million increase provided for in the 2009-2010 budget doesn't seem like much.

What do you think?

[*English*]

Hon. Greg Thompson: Some of the money on the OSI clinics that we have dedicated was budgeted in 2007, and a lot of the cost to that was getting the program in the centres up and running, which we have done. So within Veterans Affairs there's been some adjustment. We have not lost any services to our veterans at Veterans Affairs, or any delivery of services to our veterans, and that's the important thing to remember.

When we take a look at the veterans population—and I'm reminded of this quite often—we're losing our World War II veterans. We're losing, on average, 20,000 a year, and the number of traditional World War II veterans is being reduced every year. Then we're bringing newer veterans to replace them. We'll never run out of veterans. We have that big number of about 170,000 World War II veterans left with us today. They're all octogenarians and some a little bit older. So we're losing somewhere between 15,000 and 20,000 of those men and women every year. But our commitment and our financial resources to that family hasn't really changed, because we're continuing to award and adjust pensions for many of those, ongoing, because of ailments that crop up as a result of old age. Some of the support that's ongoing is for their widows or family members as well.

The department still has a very healthy budget, and despite the fact that we have a decreasing older veterans population, that budget really hasn't been diminished in terms of the service or the delivery of those services to those veterans.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Roger Gaudet: I'd like to speak for my friend Gilles Perron, whom most of you know. A report on post-traumatic stress disorder was produced at CFB Petawawa, but I haven't yet had time to read it. Last year, the committee visited CFB Petawawa. I believe I'm the only person here who visited the base. Committee members were deeply affected by the experience. While I'm pleased to see that a report was produced, I hope that some follow-up action will be taken. We were told that at Petawawa, there is one psychiatrist on staff for 13,000 people. Obviously, it is not only soldiers, but families who are need of his services. Therefore, I'll get in touch with Gilles Perron, and he can fill me in. Aside from that, I have no other questions at this time.

[*English*]

Hon. Greg Thompson: Thank you. I understand where the question is directed, and you're talking about what came out in the DND report as opposed to Veterans Affairs. It's pretty difficult to separate a veteran from an actual service member, isn't it? And I do know that we utilize psychiatrists and that kind of support within the greater society as well, so it's not just psychiatrists within DND or Veterans Affairs or anyone attached to any of our clinics who can actually serve and respond to the needs of veterans. So that's something we have done. It fits in with the previous question in terms of how our health care system works, as opposed to some of these other jurisdictions. A veteran can go to those clinics or those professionals that exist outside of the military per se, if you will. So we utilize those professionals across the country.

• (1635)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

I have two slots that come up now for the Conservative Party, and only one person has been identified so far.

Mr. McColeman, for five minutes.

Mr. Phil McColeman (Brant, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and congratulations on your appointment to chair. I know you do a great job.

Minister, as you know, there are a few new members of our party here today. As new members, I think most of us have been listening

and learning, especially from veteran parliamentarians such as you. I just want to comment on your commitment to your role. I know I've learned that through two visits to my community a couple of years ago, before I was elected to the Thank-a-Vet Luncheon committee, and then more recently at the Military Heritage Museum. And I've learned about your philosophy of erring on the side of generosity. However, we're in tough economic times, no question, and I think we'd all agree about that. Bearing that in mind, I'd like to ask you what your priorities are for improving the benefits for veterans.

Hon. Greg Thompson: I think it is an area of concern for all of us, because we do know that we're right in the midst of a worldwide economic downturn, which is not good for any of us. It's a place we don't want to be, but because of circumstances, that's where we all are. And I'm certainly not laying the blame at the foot of this government or any other government; it's just one of those things that we have to deal with as we move ahead.

We often say around this place, and it's an expression that we overuse, that we should "move forward", but the truth is that we're not going to download any of these problems onto the backs of our veterans or our men and women in uniform; we're completely committed to them. We're not going to download, as we've said, onto the backs of the provinces, because if we did that, if we talked about downloading onto the backs of the provinces, Mr. McColeman, basically it would mean that the cost of the services that we provide to the veterans through our universal health care would have to be borne by someone. So we're just not going to do that. So we're truly committed to maintaining these programs, and we'll do that. Again, the budget speaks for itself.

We just haven't done that, and I think most of our veterans and our men and women in uniform will take some comfort from that, that we haven't downloaded on them and we have no intention of downloading on them through these very difficult economic times.

Mr. Phil McColeman: Are there some programs that take priority in your ministry over others? Are there things that if you had the chance, you would see as taking priority?

Hon. Greg Thompson: Some of them have been brought to the floor here by members of the committee on both sides, but the group of veterans that I think we have to really... It's hard to focus on one group and not the other, but I think most of us get pretty emotional when we start talking about our 85-year-old veteran, that World War II veteran, and we are reaching out as much as we can to that aging veterans community, who are getting to the point in life where they do need help and they have never asked for anything in their entire life.

I'll tell this story, because I think we're going to have the time, and I hope, Mr. Chairman, I can have time to get it in. How fast we get there is always the question, isn't it, in terms of helping? But the simple answer to the question, Phil, is that those aging veterans are the ones I think about the most, in terms of whether we are doing enough for them.

When I was out in Arnprior a couple of years ago, we did an event out there and met a World War II veteran, and he told me about his family. I told this story in the Senate last year, just after the election. We normally do an event in the House of Commons and speak in the House, but we did the one in the Senate, which is always a great event, and I finally got this story into words in a condensed form.

In Arnprior, a veteran came up to me, a World War II veteran, and talked to me about having served and his brothers having served. They lived on a farm. He told me the whole story of how they enlisted and so on, a great story, and he said he got wounded, he got shot and got wounded and came back home. And I said, "I guess you're one of our clients". And he said, "No, I'm not a client. I came back; I felt pretty lucky coming back home in one piece. My wife...I married a wonderful woman and we had a nice business, a great family, and we always did okay. I always felt that somebody else could use the help." That tells the story of the whole veterans community. It's not like everyone's pounding on your door to get more. That's just an example of our veterans community. A lot of them don't ask for help.

One of the guys here had a question, and I'm not sure who it was, on how many veterans we have. We have about 800,000 veterans total in Canada, and we provide a direct service to a very small percentage of that 800,000, when you think about it. And I'm including the reservists in that 800,000, Phil.

That's an example right there of men who have never asked for anything, women who have never asked for anything, but they're reaching the stage in their life where they might need help. And I said to this particular gentleman, what would happen today if you died? If you died today and your wife needed VIP treatment, guess what—she wouldn't get it. He was not a client, and that could only be transferred under that set of circumstances. Those are the kinds of complicated problems within the department that we have to fix.

And going back to Mr. Stoffer's question, we have fixed part of it, but we'll never get there fast enough, as far as I'm concerned. It's always about taking the financial resources of the Government of Canada. How much can we do in industry? How much can we do in some of the other programs that we have? And how much can we do this year, right now, in Veterans Affairs?

So we have fixed many of those programs, Phil, and we have made it easier for some of those widows to get in, but the truth is that the frail and aging veterans population is the one that's the most heart-warming and heart-wrenching when you see how difficult it is for some of those people who are now getting into the last decade, if you will, of their life. I often say that this government or the next government will be the last government that can actually make a difference to the lives of those men and women who are now octogenarians.

• (1640)

If you look around and do the math, we have one World War I veteran left: Mr. Babcock down in Spokane, Washington. This gentleman is 108 or 109. I think he's 108, but once you get past 106 it's pretty difficult to keep track of the years. I think he knows the years better than I do.

That's what we're looking at, and it's not just a question I have myself or how I look at it. I'm not sure who the next person in this chair will be—it could be one of you or it could be somebody else—but the truth is that it's something I sort of grapple with myself. What more can we do and how fast can we get there? The line I use is that no matter how much we do for the men and women in uniform, we're never going to do enough.

We take so much for granted in this country. I mean, our basic freedoms we take for granted. These are the people who strapped on the uniform and did what their country asked them to do. I think when it gets to the point in their life when they need something, we should be there to help them.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We'll now go to Madam O'Neill-Gordon.

Mrs. Tilly O'Neill-Gordon (Miramichi, CPC): First, I want to congratulate you, David, on your appointment to the chair. I look forward to working on this committee.

I want to thank Mr. Thompson for his presentation here this afternoon.

Coming from a classroom, I can certainly reiterate the fact that there is an awful lot more now that goes into the classrooms in presentations to make children aware of our veterans.

Quite often in the legions or when I meet up with veterans they'll ask me to do this, say that, or find out this information. So I was wondering, when you're making changes to programs, if you consult veterans associations and our legions. How do you go about it?

• (1645)

Hon. Greg Thompson: I think that's one of the things we do. We work very closely with veterans organizations across the country, Tilly. We do listen to them. We have the Royal Canadian Legion, which is the biggest veteran organization with about 400,000 members. We have the ANAVETS, the Peacekeeping Veterans Association, and the Aboriginal Veterans Association. We listen very closely to them and we have a good relationship with them. In fact, we meet quite regularly with them to speak of their needs and identify some areas where they'd like to see improvements or where we can improve. It is a very close relationship and we work very closely with them.

Again, there are some big challenges out there because of the changing demographics and the aging veteran population. We don't directly fund veteran organizations, but when you look at the biggest organization, the Royal Canadian Legion, there's basically a legion hall in every country. Sadly, their membership is falling. They used to do a lot of the work themselves and still do. They do tremendous work in the veteran community in helping, reaching out to, and identifying veterans who do need help. We rely on a lot of that information coming from them in terms of those organizations. Our relationship with them is good and we work very closely with them.

The Chair: Could we suspend the clock for a moment?

Minister, did you want to have some closing remarks? If you did, Mr. Stoffer is next in line, and I'll need to deal with the time.

Hon. Greg Thompson: Would it be possible for me to run out the clock before Mr. Stoffer comes on?

Mr. Peter Stoffer: I can always get him later.

Hon. Greg Thompson: No, Mr. Chairman, I don't have any closing remarks other than a few thank yous for getting together and so forth. It's nothing formal.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

I'm sorry to interrupt, Madam O'Neill-Gordon. Please proceed.

Mrs. Tilly O'Neill-Gordon: That's fine. I've finished.

The Chair: You've finished your questioning.

Mr. Clarke, if you want to take the rest of it, there are two and a half minutes.

Mr. Rob Clarke: When we talk about veterans, as I also come from a first nations background, I'm wondering how the government is focusing on first nation and Métis veterans. From the past to the future, how are you going to address them?

Hon. Greg Thompson: Again, we have ongoing dialogue and a good relationship. There are very few outstanding issues with any of the veteran organizations, including the Métis. I'd say it's a very good, very positive relationship. We work very closely with them. Every time we take an overseas trip, the highlight is often the aboriginals who come with us and some of the truly moving ceremonies they put on in addition to some of the other stuff we're doing. It's a very good working relationship, Rob. It's very professional, very good, and very positive.

Mr. Rob Clarke: Regarding individual programs, from the government's standpoint, are we looking at going into some of the first nations communities to address issues like post-traumatic stress syndrome, which some of the veterans have faced? A lot of them are not as mobile now in their senior years, and it's harder for them to find medical taxis or find ways and means to get off the reserve. I'm just wondering if there are any types of programs out there right now that would help address this.

•(1650)

Hon. Greg Thompson: We have outreach into all of those communities, which is ongoing, so there is constant dialogue with our veterans communities so that when problems and difficulties arise we know first-hand what they are and can respond as quickly as we possibly can to them.

We've had some of those issues, which I can remember from briefing notes going back. Some *ex gratia* payments have gone out to some of the natives in the past, and we reached out very quickly and effectively without any outstanding grievances or difficulties coming forward. We still have those outreach programs there, and those offers are still out there, Rob, in the veterans community.

The bottom line is that the relationship is extremely good, extremely positive, and my door is always open, and their door is always open.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Thank you, Mr. Clarke.

Mr. Stoffer.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I go back to my previous comments, Mr. Minister, and I say this with the greatest respect, as always. We can only go, in opposition, by what you say and what your Prime Minister says. The Prime Minister said that immediately upon forming a government, those would extend to all widows of the Second World War and the Korean War. And you just said in testimony that if a World War II veteran you met passed away, his wife wouldn't qualify. You're the minister. Your Prime Minister made the promise that all of them would qualify. As a minister, you shouldn't have any difficulty ensuring that she would get that benefit. But the problem, sir, is that many widows do not qualify because of the restrictions that are placed on it. Your government promised for all and they delivered for some. This is why we voted against it.

You also said in your comments before that *all* victims of defoliant spraying would be covered from 1956 to 1984, not *some* of them from 1966-1967. I remember when you went after the former minister. I was in the room when you attacked her—quite well, I may say—and I was rooting for you because you were right.

The Prime Minister also said it, and I would assume the Prime Minister, who has all the advisors in the world around him, would not make a promise on television with Polish veterans unless he knew the facts. He must have known, first of all, how many veterans of the Commonwealth and allied forces there are in the country. He must have known that before he made the promise. And he must have known that they were going to do it right away when they formed government. They're 86 years old. They don't have much time to wait. I'm sure if you came tomorrow with a motion that said these funds will immediately go to war allowances for Commonwealth and allied veterans there wouldn't be one member of Parliament on this committee or in the House of Commons who would vote against that or even oppose that. In fact, we'd probably stand on top of the monument and salute you. But the reality is, sir, it's not done.

So I just wanted to let you know that you have a chance to redeem yourself and your party. In November 2006 you voted against the veterans-first motion, which included the clawback of the pensions at 65, the SISIP clawback, the VIP for all, the marriage after 60 act, and the amount of money a veteran can leave to their spouse going from 50% to 60%.

But having said that, I have a question for you: When will the allied and Commonwealth veterans war allowance be done? We don't have any time. Every time we wait, another few of them pass away.

Lastly, on a more serious note, you've had the honour and distinction of seeing Mr. John Babcock, and I want to thank your assistant, Madam Desjarlais, for the beautiful photo and signature that he gave me. And as you know, a motion was passed in the House of Commons that at the passing of his time, the country would honour not just him but all those—that entire generation—who served in World War I. I'm just wondering, sir, if you have any details on what preparations would be made in order to have a commemoration, not necessarily national, of all in that generation who served in World War I. As you know, we failed to do anything in that regard when the last person from the Boer War passed away. I'm just wondering what the government is planning to do in preparation for the passing of Mr. Babcock.

Thank you very much for that.

Hon. Greg Thompson: Thank you.

How much time do I have for that question, Mr. Chairman?

The Chair: Our policy here is that you can respond as robustly as you like. It's only the questioners who are limited, sir. But I think your schedule would limit you here.

• (1655)

Hon. Greg Thompson: Okay, well, I can hardly wait.

This is the hypocrisy of the New Democratic Party. They talk a good line, but when it's time to stand up in the House of Commons and actually support veterans and our men and women in uniform, they hide under the furniture—and you, Mr. Stoffer, have done that consistently.

Let me give you some examples. We were talking about operational stress injury clinics, a big financial commitment by the Government of Canada. What does this guy do? He stands up in the House of Commons and votes against it. We would not have that important service for our veterans had we depended on Jack Layton and the NDP: they voted against it.

On the bill of rights for veterans that we brought in, which veterans had been asking to have for years and which other governments wouldn't deliver on, they voted against it. How much more fundamental can it get?

They voted against an ombudsman and the resources to set up that position, and I don't have to go through what an ombudsman does and how important it is to our veterans community. That's the type of hypocrisy that we have to put up with from this guy.

That type of hypocrisy was actually identified by the Prime Minister, basically on our first day back in this session, where these people, the NDP, under the leadership of Jack Layton, came right into the House of Commons fresh from their aborted attempt to seize power with their coalition and said, without any hesitation, that no matter what the Conservatives brought in, they would vote against that budget; no matter what we did, they were going to vote against it.

So this is basically hypocrisy at its highest level. Here's a man who actually disagrees with his leader on that approach. But I'm telling you that if I disagreed with my leader to the degree this guy does with his, and if he truly believes in veterans and our men and women in uniform, which I don't question he does, I think I and he

would be forced to leave our parties, because the truth is that at some point the rubber has to hit the road. You can't stand in the House of Commons and say whatever you want to say and divorce yourself from your party and pretend you're supporting the veterans and our men and women in uniform when your vote reflects that you don't support them. You've never supported them.

Do you remember the heart-wrenching exercise we went through in terms of our Afghanistan mission and the consensus that was arrived at on the floor of the House of Commons? They just divorced themselves from all of that stuff.

Let's go through some of the specifics. We had an election in October of 2008 and we've only been back here a few weeks. We made a commitment to our allied veterans—and he forgot the burial program as well, which was another commitment that we made to our veterans. That is a commitment that we will honour, Mr. Stoffer.

When we're talking about our VIP program for our widows, the truth is that the man in the House of Commons who did most of the work on this was Mr. Cuzner. But this is a guy here who loves to piggyback and tailback on the hard work of others on the floor of the House of Commons. He can say anything he wants, because he's never going to form government; he'll never be on the side of government if he's with the NDP. So they can basically live in Disneyland and pay taxes in Canada; that's basically where these guys are coming from.

So what I do as the Minister of Veterans Affairs, and what we do in a responsible manner.... I think we are getting there much faster than many expected us to, but the fact of the matter is that for our allied veterans and some of the other commitments in the last election, the normal life of a government would be four years. In a minority Parliament, the NDP says they're going to come into this thing with the sole intention of defeating the government on the first day they're back.

How in God's name could you deliver on any promises or commitments that you made to the veterans or to any other sector of this country we call Canada, if you're going to defeat the government on the first day back? It's not even realistic, Peter. You have to stop dreaming in technicolor and accept the world for what it really is, because at the end of the day, governments have to make deliberate decisions on where money is going to be spent.

• (1700)

The fact is that the money we're spending at Veterans Affairs is significant. I went through the numbers with Roger. You could argue that it's not enough, that \$3.4 billion is not enough, that you should be able to do more. It's all true. But at the end of the day, you have to manage through each and every one of these.

The truth is that we have made progress. For you to sit there, Peter, and pretend that the world would change remarkably and everything would be done tomorrow if you formed government, well, that just ain't believable. I mean, the world doesn't work that way. It doesn't. And when you publicly disagree with your leader, it's time that the public disagreement is reflected in your vote on the floor of the House of Commons.

The Chair: Mr. Minister, order.

Hon. Greg Thompson: Have some backbone—

The Chair: Order, order!

Hon. Greg Thompson: —and stand up and vote against him.

The Chair: Minister Thompson, just for dignity and protocol, perhaps you could address your comments through the chair.

Hon. Greg Thompson: Oh. Sorry, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Would you like to take this chance to answer the Mr. Babcock question with regard to the memorial?

Hon. Greg Thompson: I last spoke with Mr. Babcock—

Mr. Peter Stoffer: No, we moved a motion last year that if he passes away, Canada would have a national remembrance for all of those—not just him, but all of those who served in World War I.

Hon. Greg Thompson: Again, I have been down to see Mr. Babcock a number of times. I think it would be great if every member of Parliament could get down to meet Mr. Babcock. He's a remarkable Canadian, the only World War I soldier left, the only survivor.

On this, Peter, he does have his own personal requests that he's asked for and that we will honour. But it will mark the passing of a generation of Canadians, a special generation, often referred to as Canada's greatest generation. It will be significant. On the personal side for Mr. Babcock, it will be in keeping with his wishes. We're not going to violate his wishes. At the end of the day, I think it will be something that even an NDPer and a Conservative will both stand up and say is pretty good.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Thank you.

Hon. Greg Thompson: And thank you for changing the tenor of the meeting.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Minister. I understand your timeline was five o'clock.

Yes, Madame Guarnieri.

Hon. Albina Guarnieri: Mr. Chair, was there ever a bill of rights? Did I miss something? Did a piece of legislation go through the House on a bill of rights? Perhaps the minister could clarify.

The Chair: First off, we've reached the time limit of 5 p.m., and I don't know if that's a point of order.

Hon. Albina Guarnieri: It's an important point, since the minister has belaboured the point.

The Chair: I understand; it is a point of information.

There is a veterans bill of rights—

Hon. Albina Guarnieri: There's the charter of rights, but a bill of rights....

Did I miss something when I was on this committee?

An hon. member: I'm thinking you missed quite a bit.

Hon. Albina Guarnieri: Actually, I never slept.

What's the bill number, Minister?

The Chair: Hang on. Order, please.

Hon. Greg Thompson: That's Albina being clever.

Hon. Albina Guarnieri: No, no.

Hon. Greg Thompson: This is connected to the budget, but I'll explain that at a later date.

Hon. Albina Guarnieri: But you belaboured the point.

Hon. Greg Thompson: A former Minister of Veterans Affairs should understand that connection, but following the meeting, I'll meet privately with Albina and explain it, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Minister, do you have some closing remarks? You had informed the committee that you had a timeframe of 5 p.m., so I would like to honour that.

By the way, I should note that Mr. Stoffer was the one who said that he was very impressed that you had responded to the committee very quickly. It was not a partisan statement. We're all very appreciative of the fact that after just inviting you last week, you are here.

So I want to give you the opportunity to make closing remarks, or if you have some extra time, then we'll go the extra round.

Hon. Greg Thompson: Well, would closing remarks pre-empt all of the future discussion, Mr. Chairman?

The Chair: Yes, if your timeframe is still the same.

Hon. Greg Thompson: Not that I want to run out the clock, and I won't run out the clock, but I want to say that I think it is important to get together like this, at this committee. You truly do good work. We will have our disagreements here at the table; I guess it's a question of how fast we can get to where we all want to be.

I think we have done a pretty fair job. I suppose I could give myself higher marks and say we've done a heck of a good job, an excellent job, but the truth is that the work will never be done when it comes to our veterans. I mean, we have some real challenges there. I think we've addressed many of them. We've honoured the commitments we've made to them over the past number of years.

The one that we focused on today, in terms of a commitment we've made and haven't honoured, is the allied veterans. That's a commitment that we'll honour.

I think our record in terms of achievements speaks for itself, Mr. Chairman, and we're going to continue to move forward on all of those files.

• (1705)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Thank you, Ms. Tining.

Hon. Greg Thompson: I've just received a note that the deputy minister and the assistant deputy minister will be here before the committee on Wednesday, so that's encouraging news for Mr. Stoffer and others. They'll probably be on better behaviour if the minister's not here.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister, for your testimony.

We will recess for two minutes, if people want to bid the minister goodbye. Then we'll have some committee business to attend to.

- _____ (Pause) _____
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The Chair: Ladies and gentlemen of the committee, we have some business we need to go through that I need to ask you about. Some of it is to advise you of things that have been done and get some feedback from you if you want additional work done. The rest is on invitations and future business.

Mr. Stoffer, you asked that notification go out to veterans organizations regarding the makeup of the members of the veterans affairs committee. I just wanted to let you know that the Royal Canadian Legion, the National Aboriginal Veterans Association, the Korean War Veterans Association, and the Army, Navy & Air Force Veterans have been advised. Are there any others you want advised?

• (1710)

Mr. Peter Stoffer: The UN peacekeeping one should be advised, and Cliff Chadderton's group, the National Council of Veterans Associations. Those are the six big ones, of course, and then there are many other smaller groups across the country.

The Chair: Thank you.

Does that meet with the approval of the rest of the committee?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Next we have a letter drafted here. Is there any input on it? Does it meet with your approval? It's for the former chair, Mr. Anderson, giving him best regards and thanks from this committee. That's acceptable.

I also want to remind you it's the 60th anniversary of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. There's an ice sculpture that the minister's unveiling on Thursday, February 12, at 7 p.m. Everybody's aware of that. I believe you've been notified. You'll be notified again, because there's a change in where the reception will be. It was supposed to be at the Lord Elgin Hotel, but it will now be at the Cartier Drill Hall beside City Hall.

We had this event last year, but it was during the day—when the ice sculpture was unveiled. It's a nice ceremony. I certainly hope it will be warmer than last year.

Mr. Greg Kerr: If enough of us want to go from the House, maybe we could get a bus and go as a group.

The Chair: I guess we could do that, but I would have a hard time justifying the expense for two blocks.

Mr. Greg Kerr: Is that all it is? This is not the one that's way out there.

The Chair: I don't believe so. I believe it's just around the corner. Is that correct?

Mr. Greg Kerr: We could take a green bus down.

The Chair: It's just a nice little stroll—as long as it's not as cold as it was last year.

Albina, do you have a question?

Hon. Albina Guarnieri: No, I was just going to say it's very close—it's walking distance from here.

The Chair: Monsieur Gaudet.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Roger Gaudet: My question is simple. It's possible that there may be a vote on Thursday at 6:30 p.m. If that is the case, we are not likely to be out of here before 7 p.m.

[*English*]

The Chair: I understand your concern. I'm going to assume, but it's always terrible to assume, that obviously the minister will be here for the vote as well. I will confirm with you at Wednesday's meeting what will actually take place if there's a vote, but I assume that it will be delayed, and then the ceremony will happen after that, because everybody will be invited.

Was there a question over here?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Roger Gaudet: Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Madam Guarnieri, did I think you had a question again and you didn't?

Hon. Albina Guarnieri: No. I'm obviously in your thoughts.

The Chair: So I didn't miss anybody? Okay.

I understand that you will be advised again, though, just to remind you about Thursday. And I see the nod there.

The next is a letter that we received from the Dominion Institute to come and see our committee regarding their memory project. I just want to get an agreement from the committee members that they would like to do that, and if so, then we'll get back to them and try to get some potential dates.

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: The next meeting, of course, will be with the department officials to give you an overview of the Department of Veterans Affairs, and of course then questions can be broad-ranging, because it is basically a full briefing.

Other than the future schedule that I have missed, does everybody has a copy of this? It's distributed. Obviously this will be some good substance for your questions on Wednesday.

Yes, Madam Foote.

• (1715)

Ms. Judy Foote: I'm just wondering how soon will we get the minutes of this meeting.

The Chair: Tomorrow the blues will be available.

So the next thing that I'd like to discuss and put on the table would be future meetings.

Now, I should advise this present committee that in the last Parliament we did get almost 50% of a study completed, which we were doing as a comparison in G-8 countries versus Veterans Affairs here. Obviously I'm at the behest of the committee, but that might be something you'd want to pick up, considering substantial work was already done.

Mr. Stoffer.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Just for the benefit of the new members, the study actually would have been very good to compare, because we always hear our soldiers and airmen and sailors who are fighting shoulder to shoulder with other countries—in NATO conflicts and with the Americans in that—saying shouldn't benefits be sort of similar? If you look at Britain, for example, Britain now offers almost \$1 million in the event of loss of life and the ultimate sacrifice. And if you're severely injured, you get a lump-sum payment plus a life-long pension; whereas our veterans charter here offers you a lump-sum payment and there is no pension after that. So these are some of the comparisons we wanted to see.

Also, we had the Australian high commissioner here, who indicated that Australia has 20 million people, and a client base of 440,000 individuals in their DVA. They have an administrative workforce of 2,300 people and they have a DVA budget of \$10.5 billion Canadian. Ours is 33 million people, a \$3.5-billion budget, 217,000 clients, and a workforce of 3,800. And it was a good comparison to see where we could streamline the processes, because you know Minister Thompson himself said they're looking at departmental reviews to speed up this process. And he said 29 days. That's in an exceptional circumstance. We have hearing loss cases that are up to five years, of people appealing back and forth, and I'm sure you have it on your files as well.

So I would highly recommend that this committee continue that review of the department to see where we can then advise the minister or the government how to streamline processes in order to get more bang for your buck for the veteran and their family.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Stoffer.

Are there any other comments regarding the G-8 comparison research?

I'm advised, then, if we're going to take up where a former committee left off, we'll need to have a motion that the evidence and documentation received by the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs during this second session of the 39th Parliament in relation to its study of veterans services offered by members of the Commonwealth and the G-8 be taken into consideration by this committee in this session.

Do you so move, Mr. Stoffer?

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Yes.

The Chair: I have a seconder for that.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: It's carried. Thank you very much.

Mr. Kerr.

Mr. Greg Kerr: I have a question. Obviously, the work has been done. I assume that before we get into it there will be a briefing on what did take place, what happened, and at what point it stopped and so on, before we start and go any further.

The Chair: Without any further consultation, I think one of the first things we'd do is get the evidence to you directly from the blues of the four meetings that we had. There were at least four. Two were by teleconference, I believe, and two were live. We'll get those blues to you. Then we would go from there as far as getting everybody up to speed is concerned.

A voice: [*Inaudible—Editor*]

The Chair: Okay. Thank you.

You see, I have so many resources here. Michel, of course, can do a briefing note in that regard as well.

There's one other thing that I should have mentioned, too, and I don't know, Mr. Stoffer, if you remember it. We were kind of doing it simultaneously. I think it was because Mr. Anders had an interest in burial places in the United States. He had talked about visiting them quite a bit. We did have a couple of members go to Beechwood Cemetery. We began a study regarding the Last Post Fund. Is that right?

A voice: It was related to that.

The Chair: It was related to the last post. I know there were some concerns that people wanted to have in a report in regard to graves that were not marked in Beechwood, so again, I'd leave that to the committee as something possible to move forward on. Of course, again, I'll take any kind of input on future schedules as well.

Mr. Stoffer.

● (1720)

Mr. Peter Stoffer: You're absolutely right, Mr. Chair. The discussion was around not just the Last Post Fund, which does assist many veterans in getting a proper headstone in their final burial place, not just at Beechwood, but right across the country. The problem was that there just weren't enough funds in the Last Post Fund in order to do that. Of course, what happens to the older headstones that may have been damaged or have fallen down, or where the inscription was not done properly? What about the repair on that? It's fallen upon a lot of volunteer groups in small communities across the country: the Legion, the Army, Navy and Air Force Veterans, etc. That was one of the things.

Also, one of the discussions, sir, is that because Ste. Anne's Hospital does such a great job working on behalf of veterans, it being the only federal hospital in the country for veterans, I know that Rob and I had a discussion in regard to seeing Walter Reed Hospital in the United States and what they do with their returning veterans from, for example, Afghanistan, and doing a comparison, but that was further down the road.

The Chair: I think the desire to visit Ste. Anne's was mentioned by another committee member as well. We did in the last Parliament, but the renovations were actually going on when we were there. Apparently they're completed now, which would make a lot of difference.

Would the committee desire a visit to Ste. Anne's?

Mr. Peter Stoffer: It's just a one-day thing. There's no problem with that.

The Chair: That's correct. Last time, it took pretty well a full day to travel there and back.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: They serve that nice gelatin food. It's really nice.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Remember that? It's for those who can't consume their food properly. They actually purée it. The veterans love it. It tastes really good; it's just that it's puréed. It works wonders for the veterans. They designed that system at Ste. Anne's.

The Chair: Actually, Mr. Stoffer brings up a good point. Not only do they purée it, but they reconstitute it to look like its actual state. It's puréed and then returned to looking like its actual state, so it's also appetizing.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: It's different.

The Chair: Is there any other input on our future schedule for investigations and inquiries into veterans affairs?

Mr. Stoffer.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: I have just one thing. In the near future, if time permits, and obviously if resources permit, perhaps there could be an opportunity for the committee to see the veterans unit in Charlottetown, because in many, many cases, the concern is not just in Ottawa, but at the Charlottetown base where the DVA was moved many years ago. I've toured it twice already. It's a wonderful facility. The people are fantastic. It's just these little steps along the way, and I think it would be helpful for everyone to see it, because when you're dealing with your constituents, all of their appeals go to Charlottetown. It's nice that you've been there and can help your constituents a long way in moving some of their cases forward.

The Chair: I put that to the committee as to whether that's desirous of a future trip as well.

An hon. member: Yes, if there's some nice warm weather there.

The Chair: You know, it probably will be warm weather, because if I remember what Mr. Anders had to go through, I believe we have to make an application to the liaison committee, and I don't believe the liaison committee is set up or has had their first meeting yet.

If that's the case, we'll work up what's necessary for the budget, and so on, we'll bring it to the committee, and then I will do the work of defending it.

Is there any other input on future business? No? Then I would accept a motion to see the clock at 5:30.

It is moved by Mr. Stoffer.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: The meeting is adjourned.

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