

Veterans deserve respect and care

By TOM BIRCHALL

It is vital that Canadian military veterans receive the long-term medical treatment and respect they have earned through their service to this country. This is the thrust of a study conducted by the Royal United Services Institute of Nova Scotia (RUSI-NS), a bipartisan discussion and education forum on defence and security issues.

Army, navy and air force members returning from the Second World War or the Korean War with mental or physical disabilities received pensions and long-term care for conditions related to their service overseas. Veterans' hospitals were built to provide in-patient care and staffed with doctors and other medical staff well-versed in the special needs of veterans.

Although the relatively small number of modern veterans makes retention of all existing Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC) facilities impractical, RUSI recommends a contract be drawn up between VAC and the provincial health systems to pay for beds and other services. This process already exists, as some Second World War and Korean War veterans live in community nursing homes.

Even before the Canadian government introduced the New Veterans Charter in 2006, benefits had changed. For example, post-Korean War veterans were no longer eligible for treatment in Veterans Affairs facilities either as long-term patients or simply for appointments with doctors specializing in problems specific to veterans' needs.

The RUSI study found that few military members came home during the years after the end of the Korean War with severe physical injuries or mental health problems such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). But in the 1990s, Canadian military personnel began to participate in active combat and a significant number returned with serious physical wounds and psychological problems.

VAC does indeed cover certain medical expenses and rehabilitation programs when military personnel are released, but does not provide services for acute or long-term care needs. For some of these people, rehabilitation is not a viable alternative. What they need is a place with appropriate care in which to live the rest of their lives in dignity.

There are long waiting lists for nursing home beds in every province and the problem is expected to worsen as baby boomers age. If a veteran is finally able to find a bed, the facility is unlikely to have the expertise necessary to deal with PTSD or other veteran-specific problems.

Veterans Affairs Canada must continue to shoulder the responsibility for finding appropriate care in a reasonable time frame for our post-Korean War veterans. Simply paying some of the bills does not honour the covenant with those who volunteered to serve and who were necessarily placed in harm's way.

In the short term, modern veterans should have access to the existing long-term care facilities and expert specialists with some modification to the programs to accommodate the rehabilitation needs of younger veterans. But a long-term solution, while difficult, must be found.

We created a covenant with our soldiers when we sent them on these dangerous missions and many of them responded by serving at the expense of their health, well-being, and even their lives. Let's honour our side of the bargain.

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