



Transcript of Opening Panel:
Learning from Lived Experience
Sharp Dopler, Nadine Schultz-Nielsen, and Christine Wood
Chaired by Maya Eichler

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Eichler: So, we begin our symposium by centering the voices of diverse military and veteran lived experience, and we do so because at TMC we believe that listening to, and learning from, those who've been harmed by the military institution is key to moving forward in a meaningful and informed way, when it comes to culture change. Our panelists today, Christine Wood, Nadine Schultz-Nielsen, and Sharp Dopler, have all disrupted the status quo and will share some of their visions for us for alternatives for military culture. Just two quick housekeeping things: the first is that we will apply Chatham House Rule to the discussion portion, so you can attribute things that are said by the panelists for the first kind of half of this session but anything that comes up in discussion and Q&A please do not recount with attribution, the second thing I want to say is that we are video recording the first half of this panel because we want to capture some of the insights that will come from our panelists, but we will turn off the video recording for the Q&A, so that everyone feels comfortable asking questions. So that's just for your information.

So, let me introduce our panelists now. Sharp Dopler you've already gotten to know, but I will provide a more formal introduction. Sharp is a non-binary, two-spirit person of Indigenous and Irish ancestry, their Indigenous ancestry is tied to the Meshkwahkihaki, Asakiwaki, and Aniyunwiya peoples. They live, work, and play in Ottawa, the unceded traditional territory of the Omàmiwinini and Anishinaabeg people. Sharp is a registered psychotherapist, advocate and activist, who uses all the pronouns in every context. He is a military veteran, LGBT purge survivor, and martial artist. She is a carrier of ceremony and helper in Indigenous and other communities. Sharp also serves as Rainbow Veterans Canada board member, to help keep survivor stories alive and support 2SLGBTQ+ plus veterans.

Next to Sharp, we have Nadine Schultz-Nielsen who served as a Sonar Operator in the Canadian Armed Forces Navy for 12 years. She retired in 2013. Nadine was a member of the "It's just 700" group, and was selected as one of the plaintiffs for the Heyder Beattie Sexual Misconduct Class Action lawsuit. She has gone on to participate as a class member representative in the Heyder Beattie Sexual Misconduct Class Action Oversight Committee, she also currently serves her local Royal Canadian Legion branch as a service officer for veterans.

And, to Nadine's left we have Christine Wood. Christine signed up in 2010 for the Canadian Armed Forces Air Force Reserves as a Logistics Officer. Shortly after her sexual misconduct related release in 2014, she became a powerful veteran advocate voice and executive member of "It's Just 700" the former Military Sexual Trauma Peer Support Group. Christine has been



honored to testify on military sexual trauma related issues, to both levels of Canada's parliament, just up the hill from us, and to serve on the External Advisory Committee to the Sexual Misconduct Support and Response Centre of the Department of National Defence.

We're going to keep this conversational today, I have a couple of questions—they will each take turns in responding but we can also change things up—we'll just see how it flows. So, the first thing I wanted to ask each of you is if there's anything that you would like to add to the introduction that I already provided. Is there anything that I didn't mention that you would like our audience to know about you before we go on to the other questions. Christine, anything that I didn't mention?

Wood: I think it's important that everybody understands that when we come before you, it's not truly just as individuals, but it is with the support, and because of the support, of other people who have helped get us here. I'm forever grateful to them. Thank you.

Eichler: Nadine, is there anything you wanted to add?

Schultz-Nielsen: I absolutely agree with what Christine said, I absolutely lost my sense of self when I left the military. Without advocating for others and for future, I'd have nothing, like, there's nothing out there for us without this. So, thank you for allowing us to continue with our journey.

Eichler: Thanks. Sharp, anything to add to my intro?

Dopler: I am a LGBT Purge survivor, I served as a Cadet Instructors Cadre Officer, which occasionally causes me to elicit a response from other veterans that I'm not actually veteran, to which I say unkind things. See—I can occasionally sensor myself! I was probably one of the last people impacted by the formal Purge policy. I was purged five years after the policy was officially changed, in 1997. Because I was a CIC officer, and experienced the worst of it after the policy changed, I didn't believe I was enough to be part of the Class Action. And I was lucky enough to have a remarkable therapist, who was also a Purge survivor, who disabused me of that notion. And, here I am. We, all of us, whether it is the Purge, or the military sexual trauma, or just the trauma of being a member of the military—just the trauma, haha—our strength is in one another, because we know that the system is still problematic. And that's an understatement. So, now I'll shut my pie-hole, thank you.

Eichler: So, the title of our symposium is, "Dare to Disrupt the Status Quo," so we know all of you have done that. You have dared to disrupt the status quo, but can you tell us more about the ways in which you've done that, through your experiences, or your work, or your advocacy. Nadine, are you good to start us off?

Schultz-Nielsen: I have no notes so bear with me. Disrupting the status quo—I come from a line of women on both sides of my family who are disruptors. My grandmother will be turning 100

years-old in December. She is my community's last surviving World War 2 veteran, she out-lived all the men. She was the Royal Canadian Legion's first female president in Canada, and she was my rock growing up. She was my strength. My mom—completely different. She was also a disruptor. Back in the early 80s she walked away from a marriage and left her two children with her ex-husband and chose to live a life for herself. I didn't understand it until recently but—I didn't understand her at all. Growing up I remember she worked for Sears, and she picketed on a strike line by herself because nobody else was brave enough to go out and picket with her. This was in Sydney, Nova Scotia—I don't know if anybody, who knows what it's like in Cape Breton, but women generally just don't do stuff like that. I've disrupted the status quo by leaving the military, joining the Class Action, and ensuring that my voice has continued to (be heard) throughout past 10 years. But, also on the home front, I said before advocacy has given me life.

So, for the past ten years I have been a stay-at-home mom, raising my two children, because after the military I didn't know what else to do. So, I got married, had some kids and spent 12 years living what feels to me like a very unnatural life. Domestication isn't for everybody, so I have gone on to not only disrupt publicly, but recently I've disrupted my own family and did the unbearable. Just what my mom did—left. My grandmother also left after 50 years of marriage. Everybody has their reasons for doing what they do; my reason is for 10 years I've been advocating for everybody but myself, and it's my turn now to take care of me and to ensure that my children understand that they don't need to live the life that previous generations have lived. So, I'm all about disruption, but the important thing is just taking care of myself now and it's taken 10 years of looking after everybody else first. And so, I begin a new journey and without the advocacy for other military personnel I never would have found me in the process. Because I did when I left the military, I lost myself, so.

Eichler: Thanks Nadine. Sharp.

Dopler: My existence is a disruption. I was assigned female at birth, and drank the Kool-Aid for a long time. I came out as a lesbian over 40 years ago. Seen a lot of change. I was an “out” lesbian more or less around the time I enrolled, but enough less that I wasn't actually lying when they asked me if I was gay, 'cause I thought I was going to be enough. So, it didn't matter. I am a disruption. I am a white passing Indigenous person who is undocumented, but I know who I am, and nobody gets to take that away from me. Ever. Like my relative here (gestures to Nadine), when my military career ended my life almost ended, because at that point in my life, it was the part of my identity that I could feel pride in, and it was taken away because some commander decided that I was a god damn dyke and he wanted me out.

I was lucky enough to have an elder who noticed what was going on, and when he asked me what was going on I said, “Ah, nothing.” He was a bit of a crusty old guy, he says, “Bullshit! Come talk to me.” And I told him my tale of woe, and how sick I was, I'm a trauma survivor from childhood, and I have IBS, and the result of what I went through the end of my career meant that my digestive system essentially shut down. You might say I couldn't give a shit. I was probably a week or two away from going septic. That's how bad my guts were, and this elder



cornered me, in a good way, told me what to do. Told me to take my story and write it on Birch bark, and take all the documents that I had been obsessing over once I had cleared my name, build a sacred fire, burn the documents, burn the story and walk away. And I did, and in 24 hours my guts unlocked. And I'm here today.

I did a really good job of wrapping up all the shit. I locked it away for 20 years, I didn't give it a thought. I couldn't. I couldn't be around most straight women; they couldn't be trusted. Couldn't be around most men; they couldn't be trusted. Didn't leave me a lot of options. And so I leaned into my culture, into the teachings that were being offered to me. Still feeling not enough. And now I find myself occasionally being described as a two-spirit elder. I'm a helper - that's what I do, I help. When I'm not disrupting, sometimes I help by disrupting. I can disrupt by just being in the room. I can disrupt with gentleness, and I can disrupt with outrage. I'm not always the most politically correct person in the room, 'cause I don't pussyfoot around anything. Anything. Got a question? Ask me. Better be ready for the answer. Miigwech.

Eichler: Thank you. Christine, how have you disrupted the status quo?

Wood: Looks like we're good (checking mic), alright. I think my parents would describe me as a born disruptor. But in truth, I think I get those qualities and those strengths from them. This isn't the first time that I have been asked to speak about my lived experience, but I find that every time I'm asked to, I end up finding and approaching the questions through a different lens and a different perspective. And, just recently having requested that my cold case—an assault that happened 12 years ago—be reopened, I have to say my lived experience is not done. It's not finished, it's not over, it hasn't ended.

I have spoken in front of the Senate and the House of Commons, and I have raised my voice to ask for what military sexual trauma survivors need. I have raised my voice in testimony to ask for what women veterans need. And as much as I feel like I have done more outside of the military than I ever would have been able to do in uniform to make it a better institution, there is still a lot left to do. There is a lot that I am not okay with. I am not okay with the fact that hundreds of reports of sexual assault and sexual harassment are still filed each year, and I'm not okay with the fact that most of the cases that have been transferred to the civilian justice system are falling through the cracks because of systemic barriers on the provincial side of the court system.

These cases were transferred out of the military's jurisdiction without any federal funding being given to the provinces to help with investigating, labs, trial prep, what kind of work the Crown has to do. I know friends who are serving right now who are so decimated by the workload they're carrying because of this mass exodus of people from the CAF since the Purge and the MST lawsuits really became public and raised awareness, and then the scandals of the Spring of '21 became public. My friends are wearing three hats, doing the work of three people, and they are begging to go on deployments to dangerous places in this world, just to get a break. I mean the military environment is exceptional—in a good way, and in a really awful way too.

I am tired but I refuse to give up and I refuse to stop speaking. In the beginning I was waiting for invites. I started off slow with *It's Just 700*, I didn't know what I was doing, and now I'm the one who writes to people. I do. I will write to the Minister of National Defence, I will write to the Minister of Veterans' Affairs, and I will talk and speak as often as I can to keep raising the points that need to be raised. And especially in rooms full of people like yourselves, because you're not here if you're not interested, but we cannot do it alone. I have full faith that the CAF can be a better place—a better institution that my son or my daughter may choose to join someday—but we will not get there without sustained effort, and we will not get there without your help.

So, I thank you for coming here tonight, and this weekend, but I hope, and I believe that you will follow through where and when you can, just as we do. Thank you.

Eichler: Thanks Christine. Yeah, I think it's our shared responsibility to disrupt the status quo. I want to get some water for our panelists, if Lea or Ash could please bring some more water. And I know the audience wants to engage and ask questions, but I'm going to ask you one more question just before we go to Q&A.

So, keeping in mind everything you've shared and your combined experiences, what alternatives do you envision for military culture? What would you like to see? Sharp I'm going to start with you.

Dopler: We've already started to see it, kinda. Indigenous people have been allowed to grow their hair, carry the things that we need to carry, or wear the things that we need to wear—whether it's a Métis sash or an eagle feather, or whatever it is we need. I mean, the alternative for me is about balance, the problem with the system, as I see it, is the rigidity. It's the same problem that is inherent in colonialism. It's the rigidity, it's the hyper focus on the structure and the loss of the human being. In Canada, we hold ourselves up as this great nation of peacekeepers. What makes peace? It isn't a gun. It isn't a structure. It's human connection. It's the thing that we're all starving for. What helped me to partially recover from my interesting life is seeking balance. Being able to come to a place like this to have this discussion and start in ceremony. And ceremony can be anything. Sharing a song together. It doesn't have to be a smudge. Sharing food together, sharing stories together.

The problem with the military structure is it tries to make us unhuman. To take the human out of us. Anybody who's been through basic can attest to that, eh? And it is our humanity, our ability to connect with one another, to connect with our own hearts, to connect with our own bodies, and to connect with our own spirits, however you conceive that to be, or whether you even do. But the alternative, is to find the humanity again. To understand that to be a warrior, in the teachings that I've been given, it means balance. Warriors didn't just make their articles of war, warriors made things like a prayer flute, which is a very soft sound. A warrior's number one responsibility is to seek the truth, to speak the truth, and to act on the truth. To care for those

who need the care. And sometimes what that looks like is picking up the garbage on the Powwow ground. To be a warrior is as much about gentleness, kindness and compassion as it is about being *zhimaaganish*—a soldier—and being willing to put your life on the line for those that you love. That’s the change. Simple, huh? How about you (gesturing to Nadine)?

Schultz-Nielsen: Um, for me, I look, I want my children to be able to serve proudly. Without fear, or without ever having to experience any of the things that we’ve experienced. That’s why we’re here, that why I’m here. It’s, for me, it’s, I can’t answer the question. I can’t—I don’t know how to envision. I just pray that the work that we do creates a safer military for all in the future, for the next generation. Because the way it’s working right now, we’re not going to have a military, because we’re not going to be able to get people to join, and people will not stay.

Eichler: Christine.

Wood: That leads straight in, to my first vision for the future, is of a CAF that has a leveling playing field. For men and women, and everyone in between. Everyone alongside of us. I don’t think there ever was a level playing field made when women entered the military. I don’t think funding was given to meet our needs. To do environmental scans for chemicals that are gonna hurt us. That will hurt our chances of having babies, and sex-specific cancers—there’s a lot of things that didn’t get done, we just added women. And I, I envision a CAF that has the supports that everyone needs, every individual needs. To have an equitable chance at succeeding in their career, that means daycare on site, that means, I mean so many basics. But I also, I envision a workplace where diversity is not seen as a threat. I pray for people to see diversity as a net gain for everyone. This is a gain for everyone. We gain by having someone shorter, or faster, or who speaks five languages, or who—you know what I mean? There are so many different talents and so many different qualities that a person can bring.

I would like to see those who see diversity as a zero-sum game come around, and see the positive impact the diversity can actually have. I would like to see that unearned white male privilege challenged, but in a way that does not completely alienate white men. I would like to see men as our allies in this, in this journey. Sharp you mentioned the rigidity—my husband is at RMC right now doing his Masters, and he says he's stunned when seeing cadets walk by with purple hair, and ponytails, and earrings, and whatever. To me, that's great, that's surface level. I'd like to see the programs back it up, I'd like to see legit supports back it up. I would like to see people—I would like a re-look at this this transfer of cases to the civilian justice system because until that system is right, and so that system can operate in a timely fashion, we're not serving victims any better than we were before.

I think the CAF did what was easiest, DND did what was easiest, in just shuffling that whole file off to the provinces. It was not victim-centric, it was not trauma-informed. I want those principles to be the bedrock of the future. I want GBA+ analysis to be the foundation of a project, not the box that's checked at the end. I want a Canadian Armed Forces that I am proud



of, and that I know that I have full faith would honor the commitment of my daughter or my son if they choose to serve. 'Cause right now I don't see that, but that is what I want.

Eichler: Thank you, Christine, and Nadine, and Sharp. We're going to turn off the video recording now and get ourselves set up for Q&A.