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Ottawa lawyer who represents military sex assault victims receives honour from legal association

David Pugliese, Ottawa Citizen · Postmedia News ; Posted: a day ago ; Updated: 9 hours ago ; 3 Min Read

An Ottawa lawyer who has been front and centre representing military personnel who have sexually assaulted and military families battling the defence department has been recognized by the Ontario Bar Association.

Retired colonel Michel Drapeau was selected as a recipient of the Award for Distinguished Service by the association. That honour recognizes exceptional career contributions and achievements by a member of the Ontario Bar Association.

"It came as a surprise and a very pleasant surprise at that," said the 78-year-old Drapeau. "I didn't expect it."

An award ceremony has been postponed because of the pandemic but Drapeau is hopeful that might take place sometime in 2022.

Drapeau is well known in Canada's defence community for representing military personnel at a variety of court martials and disciplinary hearings, victims of sexual harassment and assault cases, as well as military family members in legal actions against the federal government and Department of National Defence. In addition, he has represented

other military families in public interest hearings involving the Canadian Forces.

Drapeau served in the Canadian Forces for 34 years before retiring as a colonel. In his immediate retirement in the mid-1990s, he was instrumental in exposing some of the spending abuses by senior officers and public servants. Among the more controversial was \$300,000 spent on remodelling the office of the DND's deputy minister as well as a private fishing lodge, financed by taxpayers, but for generals and their guests.

In 1996, Drapeau went back to university, obtained a law degree and eventually opened up his practice on Somerset Street.

A number of his clients were victims of sexual assault in the military and were prominently featured in the 1998 and 2014 special reports in Maclean's magazine's investigations about such crimes in the Canadian Forces.

Over the years, Drapeau has found time to write a number of textbooks on military law and the access to information law, as well as making presentations about sexual misconduct for committees of the House of Commons as well as the U.S. Congress. In addition, the retired

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colonel teaches at the University of Ottawa as an adjunct law professor.

Sheila Fynes, who battled the Canadian Forces for years as she tried to get answers about the suicide of her son and the bungled military police investigation into that death, said Drapeau's award is well deserved. "He's always the champion of the little guy," said Fynes, who had Drapeau as her lawyer during the Military Police Complaints Commission hearing into her son's death. "I think he is just a decent, honourable man. He doesn't hesitate to help whenever or wherever he can.

"I will be forever grateful to Nicole and Michel and everyone in their office," she added, referring to Drapeau's wife Nicole.

But Drapeau has few fans within the leadership of the Canadian Forces and DND. Over the years, dozens of public affairs officers and military lawyers worked behind the scenes to counter Drapeau, according to documents obtained by this newspaper using the Access to Information law.

Drapeau's appearances in the news media especially irked the senior leadership. For instance, a TV interview with Drapeau in March 2013 prompted a 2,000-word letter to the editor crafted by DND and sent to multiple newspapers across the country.

In September 2015, then-chief of the defence staff Gen. Jon Vance called this newspaper to complain that it had included comments from Drapeau in an article outlining significant flaws in the DND sexual misconduct response centre. In 2018, Col. Jay Janzen, then a top Canadian Forces public affairs officer, tweeted to Global News executives

questioning their decision to interview Drapeau for a story about a sexual assault during a military junket. Drapeau had raised questions about the \$337,000 VIP trip organized by Vance's office, dubbed the "party flight" because of the out-of-control alcohol consumption on a military aircraft.

Drapeau said the military's attempts to try to undercut his efforts are petty but indicative of a system that is still to this day reluctant to change.

"They fought us every step of the way, and continue to do so even today," Drapeau said. "It's been tiring. But their pushback keeps me going and fighting."

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