

Dutch veterans in public opinion and press

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Every Western society has them, veterans complaining about the lack of appreciation and support from society. In the Netherlands at least, with some 150,000 veterans of wars and peacetime operations, this is certainly a stubborn phenomenon. Despite the intensive veteran policy with after care and recognition over the last two decades, feelings of lack of appreciation often make their presence felt amongst the veteran population. Government, media and society as a whole, according to a proportion of the veterans, still demonstrate insufficient appreciation for their military sacrifices, and are too critical of their military actions. This dissatisfaction, sometimes expressed in harsh words, is rooted in a further past, and would seem to be immune to all the pain alleviation of contemporary veteran policy. In a previous study (IUS 2005), after all, we demonstrated that veterans in the Netherlands in fact have little to complain about when it comes to appreciation from society, and that the media, generally speaking, write positive reports about veterans. It did however emerge that the classic picture of the veteran as a hero is increasingly giving way to the less appealing picture of the veteran as victim. Follow-up studies into reporting about veterans in the media in 2007 and social attitudes about veterans in 2006 broadly speaking confirm the results presented in 2005. These studies, together with the evaluation of the annual national Veterans' Day, also generate a number of fascinating additional results and insights that are presented in this paper.

Public opinion of the armed forces¹

Research into public opinion about veterans is an important yardstick for determining the situation when it comes to appreciation for veterans. To be able to place those social attitudes about veterans even more accurately, it is first and foremost worthwhile to consider the attitude of the Dutch population towards the current armed forces. It can after all be argued that opinions about veterans are (in part) influenced by opinions about the current performance of the individual servicemen and women and the armed forces, in other words current support within society for the armed forces. The Netherlands Veterans Institute surveyed these attitudes, tying in with a tradition of studies established since 1962 by the now disbanded Foundation for Society and the Armed Forces (Stichting Maatschappij en Krijgsmacht). An important position within all these studies was occupied by the theme 'the perceived necessity of the armed forces'. That necessity was surveyed practically every year over the last 45 years, based on the question "What is your opinion about the Dutch armed forces?". The results show a very balanced picture:

The armed forces are:

	1966	1982	1998	2006
Necessary	46%	52%	52%	52%
A necessary evil	34%	30%	22%	29%
Barely necessary	6%	9%	16%	10%
Superfluous	6%	9%	6%	5%
Don't know	8%	0%	5%	5%

Also remarkable is the development that has been observed over the past few years relating to the confidence of the population in the armed forces.

	1981	1997	2006
(Considerable) confidence in the armed forces	43%	56%	65%

Although partly as a result of differences in the methods employed in the various studies, the results over the different years may only be compared with a certain degree of caution, there would seem to be a positive trend. Almost two-thirds (65%) of interviewees in 2006 suggested they had (considerable) confidence in the armed forces. There is a positive link between 'necessity' and 'confidence'. Dutch men and women who believe that the existence of the armed forces is necessary, also have above average confidence in the organisation. It does emerge from further analysis, however, that older Dutch men and women more often have confidence in the armed forces than their younger fellow citizens. This could in part be put down to a causal link with the disappearance of compulsory military service leading to a fall in direct contact between the armed forces and society. And as an extension thereof, a variant of 'unknown, unloved'.

Public opinion about veterans

Another favourable result for veterans from the opinion survey in 2006 is that there are still relatively high levels of awareness of military operations by the Dutch armed forces since 1940. For example, in September 2006, the vast majority of respondents said they were aware of the deployment of Dutch servicemen and women during the Second World War (94%), the war of decolonisation in former Netherlands India (90%), the peace mission in Srebrenica (85%), operations in Iraq (79%) and the current mission in Uruzgan (88%). The UNIFIL mission between 1979 and 1985 in Lebanon scores awareness of 63%. On the other hand, far less known was the Dutch contribution to the Korean War (37%) in the first half of the nineteen fifties. Awareness of military operations has shown a slightly downward trend since 2002, but this would not appear to be worrisome. The negative tendency is after all above all caused by a fall in awareness of conflicts from the period 1940-1962, and that runs parallel to the ever smaller group of eye-witnesses and contemporaries, as a result of demographic developments. In addition, the conflicts from this period – with the exception of World War Two – are not closely anchored in (popular) culture and therefore not in the collective awareness, due to the almost total absence of Dutch music, literature and/or film about military experiences.

Set against the slight fall in awareness of military operations from the past, there is an increase in the number of respondents that judges military operations as ‘justified’, retrospectively. At 91%, the vast majority of society supports the deployment of Dutch servicemen during World War Two. This result is hardly surprising. More remarkable are the results for military operations which turned out badly for the Netherlands, or which were even criticised after the event. The operations in Netherlands India (47%), Lebanon (51%) and Srebrenica (56%), in comparison with previous years, are increasingly being viewed as justified (2002: 36%, 44% and 56%). Between 20 and 25% of those interviewed said they had ‘no opinion’ on these questions. However, people are far more divided about the SFIR operation in Iraq between August 2003 and March 2005: 41% consider this deployment justified, 38% are against, and 21% have no opinion. In February 2006, the Cabinet, following heated parliamentary discussion, decided to participate in the mission in Uruzgan. The political divisions of the time are even today reflected in current social attitudes about the justification of participation: of all Dutch people, in September 2006, 48% agreed, 20% had no opinion and 31% were against participation. These attitudes are relatively stable because in July 2007, a small-scale study by the Defence organisation revealed that 50% of those questioned were (strongly) in favour of the deployment in Uruzgan.

Another positive result for the veterans of the opinion survey is that the difference between appreciation for the role of the Netherlands on the one hand and on the other hand appreciation for the deployed servicemen and women once again clearly comes out to the advantage of the latter group. Apparently, the public is fully able to differentiate between policy and its military implementation. Below in graphic form is a representation of reply category “(considerable) appreciation for” as surveyed in September 2006:

	India (1945-1949)	Lebanon (1979-1985)	Srebrenica (1994-1995)	Iraq (2003-2005)	Afghanistan (2006 -)
Role of the Netherlands	39%	62%	44%	52%	56%
Deployment of Servicemen and women	60%	72%	67%	69%	72%

Here, once again, the figures have developed positively over the past five years. The table below shows the reply category “(considerable) appreciation for”:

	Role of the Netherlands		Deployment of servicemen and women	
	2002	2006	2002	2006
India	32%	39%	52%	60%
Lebanon	47%	62%	57%	72%
Srebrenica	39%	44%	59%	67%

The figures presented show that social attitudes about Dutch veterans are generally speaking fairly positive. A large proportion of society appreciates the military work undertaken by the veterans in the

past. It also emerges that if the results are set against one another in a number of years' time, an upward trend can be seen in these results, as concerns approval and appreciation.

Image of veterans in public opinion

A final encouraging result for the veterans of the survey into public opinion relates to the image of veterans, amongst the Dutch population. Over the last three years, a representative sample of the adult Dutch population was presented the statement that a large proportion of veterans have suffered psychological damage. This qualification, undoubtedly fairly unflattering for many veterans, was ascribed to in 2004 and 2005 by 69% and 59% of respondents, respectively. The survey for this statement in 2006 scored a somewhat lower result, namely 57%. It appears in this respect that it was worthwhile determining whether this picture is confirmed if respondents not only have the possibility to ascribe to a statement or reject it, but are forced to make a choice from a series of images. Put another way: to be able to determine the dominant image of veterans in society, in September 2006, an assessment was made of which of the following three classifications people considered most applicable to Dutch veterans.

“Veterans have

- | | |
|---|-----|
| 1. demonstrated courage | 73% |
| 2.psychological problems | 11% |
| 3. sometimes acted with excessive violence | 5% |
| 4. don't know | 10% |

Far and away the vast majority of those questioned therefore do not see veterans first and foremost as ‘victims with psychological problems’ but above all as ‘heroes’; although ‘psychological problems’ therefore do not form the initial association, given the responses to the previously mentioned statement, the image of psychological problems is prominently and stubbornly linked to the social image of veterans.²

Although the opinion survey in 2006 once again demonstrates results that must be to the satisfaction of the veterans, here, too, a number of notes in the margin do apply. Particularly revealing in this connection is the reply pattern to the statement put forward in 2004 “The theme veterans is a theme which I would like to know more about”. When this statement was first put forward, it was answered positively by only 35%; 27% responded neutrally, and no less than 38% disagreed. This can hardly be described as honest, warm interest. In other words: the love of the Netherlands for its veterans would appear to be more out of a sense of duty than a sense of passion.

Image of veterans in the newspapers

As previously suggested, the feeling of misunderstanding by a proportion of Dutch veterans is fed by what in their opinion are critical and negative reports about veterans and their military experiences. Although the media survey in 2005 demonstrated that in approximately 60% of their articles, newspapers wrote positively about veterans and negatively in only 10%, it was decided in 2007 to have a follow-up survey carried out into the image of veterans in Dutch newspapers. This survey was a qualitative and quantitative

content analysis of the articles appearing between the period 2000 and 2002. Effectively, this study went further along the lines of a previous study carried out by the VI, albeit this time in more detail, and using SPSS.³

The new study confirms the results of the study carried out in 2005, in broad terms. One new finding is that the veterans are often not at all the central feature of the limited number of articles that set a negative tone. It was also common that the article may have had a negative tone, but that this did not go hand in hand with a negative stereotyping of veterans. The stereotyping was often either positive or neutral. The possibility that this nuance is missed by many veterans cannot be excluded. It also emerged from the study that the veterans themselves are to a large extent responsible for the image that exists of them, because increasingly often, the veterans themselves serve as the source for the articles. Furthermore, the study showed that the stereotype of the hero, appearing in a quarter of the articles, remains to a considerable extent linked to veterans from World War Two. The stereotypes of perpetrator and guilty party, which at 12.2% are less prominently present, are above all linked to the veterans from the war of decolonisation in Indonesia and the deployment in Srebrenica. More generally, young veterans are stereotyped as health victims. This is the dominant image in 22.1% of articles. Also noticeable is the conclusion that in respect of the stereotype 'victim of misunderstanding' which relates to 16% of the articles, the sources of such articles are above all the veterans themselves or groups representing the veterans or promoting their interests. In this connection, the researcher pointed towards the dialectic process of Tennekes. Individuals create facts that then form part of a social trend as a result of which those same facts achieve social relevance and are then seen as self-evident, within a culture.

Publicity concerning National Veterans' Day

Based on the described opinion and media studies, it is possible to forcefully reject the attitude of certain veterans that they receive little or no appreciation. Nonetheless, a certain degree of reticence should be observed. It is of course a question of whether the veterans actually directly experience the appreciation. The general public may appreciate them, but need not actually express that appreciation. The positive tenor in the newspapers is often also worded very subtly. Only rarely is praise openly expressed in the newspapers. To demonstrate appreciation by society more emphatically, on the initiative of the Ministry of Defence, a National Veterans' Day was inaugurated in 2005. Since 2005, on 29 June, close to the government centre in The Hague, a large number of ceremonies, demonstrations and public activities take place, of which the march past by veterans, introduced in 2006, represents the high point. Alongside this main event in The Hague, on the initiative of regional and local government authorities and private individuals, on 29 June, more and more small-scale events are taking place right across the country, with appreciation for the veterans their central theme.

At the festivities on 29 June in The Hague, and above all during the march past by veterans held on that date, and whereby the Crown Prince takes the salute, appreciation by society for its veterans is clearly expressed. Until 2005, evidence of this appreciation was only demonstrated during a march past of

veterans that formed part of the liberation festivities on 5 May in the city of Wageningen, where in 1945 the German occupying forces surrendered to the allies. From 1975 onwards, thousands of Dutch and allied liberating forces marched past in Wageningen, from 1996 onwards supplemented by Dutch veterans of more recent conflicts and peace missions. Despite this innovation, which went hand in hand with the exchanging of the theme 'liberation' for the theme 'freedom', this celebration was still dominated by memories of the Second World War. Partly as a result of the rapid fall in the numbers of veterans of that war and the wish to breathe new life into a demonstration of appreciation for veterans, in a more modern style, the Ministry of Defence decided to shift its public effort on behalf of the veterans from 5 May to 29 June. This also offered a possibility for placing younger veterans more prominently in the spotlight. The image of veterans that prevailed in society, after all, was the image of 'the old man with a beret and blue blazer and a whole line of medals pinned to his chest'. The institution of Veterans' Day and the subsequent holding of a large march past by veterans, it was hoped, would help to adjust this inaccurate picture in society.

The media are an excellent yardstick as to whether the objective of National Veterans' Day – namely the public expression of appreciation and the promotion of attention for all groups of veterans – is achieved. Speeches by dignitaries and the march past of veterans are broadcast live on TV, whilst on 29 June, various programmes dedicate their broadcasts to veterans and their military experiences. To be able to assess the influence of National Veterans' Day on the image of veterans, the Veterans Institute carried out a content analysis of the newspaper articles concerning Liberation Day (from 1988 onwards) and National Veterans' Day (from 2005 onwards)⁴. A number of remarkable results have emerged. For example, it turns out that since 1995, veterans are increasingly often the major source for articles in the newspapers, possibly under the influence of the trend amongst journalists to introduce more 'human interest' in their articles via eye-witness accounts. Another eye-catching result is that since the institution of Veterans' Day, attention for Dutch veterans in reporting about veteran march pasts has increased considerably. Whereas in media reports on Liberation Day, Dutch veterans had to compete with foreign veterans, on National Veterans' Day, the Dutch veterans are the subject of discussion. For example in reporting of Liberation Day, Dutch veterans turned out to be the main theme in only 13.8% of all articles whilst in relation to Veterans' Day, Dutch veterans are discussed in no less than 93.3% of all articles. It also emerges that in the articles published around 5 May, veterans of any kind are only the main theme of the article in 32.9% of cases. This score has been tripled in articles relating to Veterans' Day, to 96.7%. Whereas in reporting on Liberation Day, veterans still have to compete with other facets of that liberation, Veterans' Day has become a day dominated entirely by veterans and their experiences, in all reporting.

Based on the content analysis of reporting of Liberation Day and National Veterans' Day, it also emerges that the earlier referred to inaccurate image of 'the old man with the blue blazer and the medals' has indeed, it seems, been altering over the last few years. Whereas these old veterans from World War Two still dominate 60% of the articles published about 5 May since 1988, 90% of articles about National Veterans' Day relate to other groups of old veterans and the young veterans of recent peace missions. This does not necessarily mean that attention for veterans has also altered in a positive sense, in this

respect. In the newspaper survey, and observation was also made of the stereotypes used in the articles. A determination was also made as to whether the judgement in the articles was positive, negative, nuanced or neutral in nature. As concerns stereotypes, it emerged that in more than one-third of the articles, the stereotype 'hero' applied. The less positive stereotypes such as 'victim' occurred to a far lesser degree. It was notable in that connection, however, and in the previous study, indications of this fact were indeed already found (Algra, Elands, Schoeman, IUS 2005), namely that consciously or unconsciously, veterans themselves were often the source of this stereotype. Having veterans speak out who as a consequence become the centre of attention, therefore does not necessarily lead to an improvement in the image of those veterans. Nonetheless, this is a method of reporting which, as also emerged from the same study, is being increasingly employed in reporting on veteran-related themes.

Another key conclusion that emerged from this study is the shift in tone. In the articles dealing with veterans in relation to Liberation Day, one-quarter of the articles could be viewed as entirely positive. This only applied for a small proportion of the articles appearing in relation to Veterans' Day. The majority of these articles were neutral in nature (90%). Whereas the articles relating to both days equally often make use of the stereotype 'hero', in relation to Veterans' Day, this stereotype is more often placed in a neutral context. The combination with Liberation Day is more often that of 'hero' with an entirely positive judgement. The situation in respect of less flattering stereotypes such as 'victim' is different. As already commented during the discussion of the opinion study, this is a stereotype upheld by 59% of the Dutch population. For truly negative stereotypes such as 'perpetrator', it seems there is absolutely no space at all in media reporting in relation to these days. The stereotype 'victim' is however reflected. Above all the veterans themselves indicate in interviews that they feel themselves to be victims of misunderstanding, or that their health has suffered as a result of their experiences.

In summary, it would seem that at least part of the problem in respect of the image of veterans has been partially solved by the institution of a Veterans' Day. The veterans who themselves participate in Veterans' Day, at least, experience the recognition due to them. This is in fact almost inevitable, given the volume of attention in the media for National Veterans' Day as a result of which society is receiving a more nuanced picture of veterans. Certainly, since the institution of Veterans' Day, in the media images, the population of veterans no longer consists exclusively of 'old men in blue blazers'. Young veterans are more clearly represented. As a consequence, after just three years, it would seem that a cautiously positive judgement may be passed on the institution of Veterans' Day and its effects on the image of veterans. The image of veterans is sketched out in the media on and around Veterans' Day in considerable diversity, whilst to a considerable extent, much attention is no longer on World War Two. Finally, the tendency towards veterans increasingly becoming the main subject of the article can be described as positive. More and more they are the central focus.

Veterans on Veterans' Day

Once again, the perception of veterans can of course deviate from academic findings on the basis of opinion and media studies. Scientists may clearly identify appreciation and attention for veterans, but this

does not automatically mean that the veterans experience these phenomena. National Veterans' Day was therefore evaluated amongst veterans in 2007 as well as in 2006 and 2005⁵. This evaluation was carried out by the Centre of Expertise and Research of the Veterans Institute, on behalf of the Committee for Dutch Veterans' Day. The evaluation was carried out on the basis of a questionnaire sent out to 2,400 veterans. All are veterans registered as such with the Veterans Institute. Of the approached veterans, 1,440 fell into the category 'old veterans' (having participated in missions before 1979). 960 were veterans who fell into the category 'young veterans' (missions since 1979). This is a ratio of 1.5 : 1, and this complies with the ratio in numbers between the two groups of veterans in the Netherlands. Eventually, 918 usable questionnaires were returned, representing a response rate of 38.3% is. The ratio between old and young veterans within this group was 2.0 : 1. The ages varied from 19 to 98 years.

As already stated, the purpose of Veterans' Day is to promote recognition and appreciation for veterans in Dutch society. In response to the question in this survey whether veterans have also noted that National Veterans' Day has led to greater recognition and appreciation for themselves, a majority answered in the affirmative. 60.8% of them indicated that they experienced more recognition and appreciation. 39.2% indicated they had noticed nothing. The same question was asked in the surveys in 2005 and 2006, and it would appear that over the years, veterans are experiencing more and more appreciation and recognition from society. In the 2005 study, for example, 34.8% of veterans indicated this was the case. In 2006, the percentage sharing this opinion had already risen to 47.5 % and in 2007 to the already referred to 60.8%.

It was also possible to provide a detailed explanation of the answers, and this opportunity was taken up by many veterans. These answers in fact give a greater insight into the question of appreciation and recognition by Dutch society, as experienced by veterans. A number of reactions such as "forgotten group" and "never understood, let alone respected" above all point to past events. And the situations referred to often took place decades ago. Reactions of this kind, which are above all heard from the viewpoint of veterans of the Indonesian war of decolonisation, refer to experiences which have hardly if at all been reconsidered, against the background of more recent events and changes. As a consequence, the reality content of these opinions in respect of their findings is somewhat debatable. Amongst this group, there is a risk that 'being forgotten' is part of their status as veteran, and many who hear statements of this kind tend to suspect those who express them of in some way clinging on their suffering. Other argumentation such as "we are not a soldierly people" and "the Dutch are not militaristic" would rather seem to point towards wishful thinking within a specific group of veterans, more than actually relating to a true absence of recognition and appreciation. For these veterans, it seems impossible that a society that is not "militaristic" or a people that is not "soldierly" will ever be able to recognise and appreciate its veterans. The frustrations that these statements seem to express simply prevent any possibility of a different or more positive observation.

Various other veterans were, on the other hand, capable of such positive observation. They above all pointed to the fact that the media dedicate considerable attention to National Veterans' Day and that their social environment has picked up on this theme. And for anyone staying in the Netherlands in the

period around 29 June, it is impossible to avoid that attention. All national and practically all regional newspapers publish articles about Veterans' Day, and radio and TV are also emphatically in attendance. Many of the veterans, who in their argumentation see media interest as a positive development in society, therefore express the hope that interest from society will be promoted and deepened. They see excellent prospects for information campaigns and the integration of education. In this respect, these veterans seem to thoroughly understand the vital function the media can fulfil for them, in society.

Conclusion

A proportion of Dutch veterans feel misunderstood or insufficiently appreciated. In support of their arguments, they refer to the absence of appreciation in society and critical reporting in the media. However, there is no evidence to support them. Social attitudes about veterans are developing in a direction that is in fact favourable for veterans. And reporting in newspapers is characterised by a positive basic attitude towards veterans and – partly under the influence of National Veterans' Day – increasing interest and more nuance in image creation. On the basis of the evaluations of the National Veterans' Day, it may even be cautiously concluded that more and more Dutch veterans are starting to feel appreciated. In conclusion, the question remains whether the dissatisfaction and the feelings of misunderstanding amongst certain veterans can in any way be eradicated through expressions of appreciation and positive publicity. These veterans would seem to cherish their role as 'victims of misunderstanding' and be unwilling to have that role taken away, by anyone.

¹ These public opinion results are derived from annual opinion poll on veterans issues (on line data collection, N > 1000), which is conducted by the Dutch Veterans Institute.

² 'Meer plicht dan passie, Nederland over zijn krijgsmacht en zijn veteranen', The Netherlands 2007, paper by drs. Jan Schoeman, dutch Veterans Institute.

³ 'Held dader of slachtoffer, de veteraan in de Media. drs. Eva van Beveren, Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam/ Veteraneninstituut, 2007.

⁴ 'Dat mag in de krant!', een onderzoek naar berichtgeving over veteranen', drs. Judith Plantinga, Erasmus Universiteit/veteraneninstituut, 2007.

⁵ 'Evaluatie Nederlandse Veteranendag, resultaten van de enquête onder veteranenpashouders', dutch Veterans Institute, Maj drs. P.M. Huls – van Zijl, september 2007, Doorn, the Netherlands.