



Looking back on deployment experiences

Fact Sheet

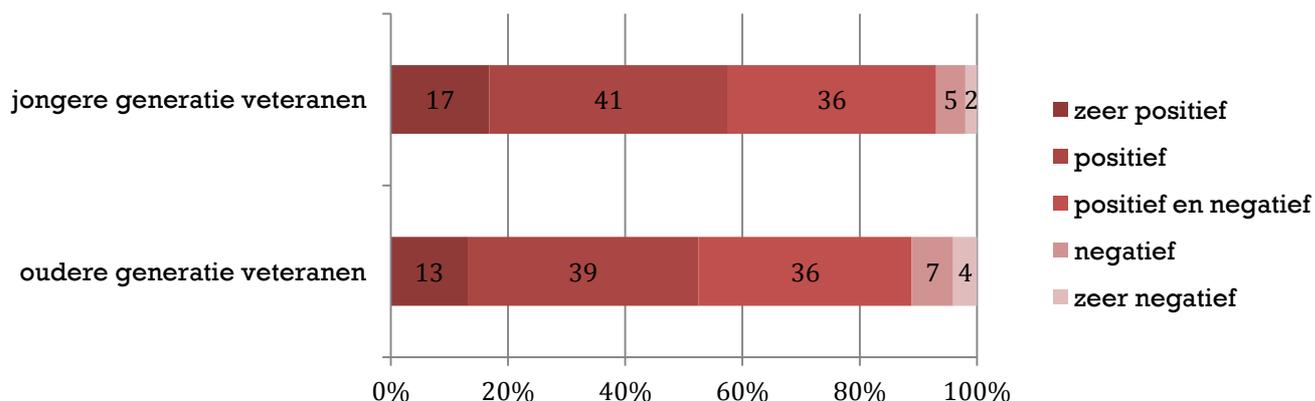
Introduction

In collaboration with Utrecht University, the Veterans' Institute has conducted a large-scale study regarding personal growth, resilience and finding meaning following participation in a military mission. The meaning veterans attach to their military deployment experiences was examined from a psychological perspective. The study involved a large-scale questionnaire survey, supplemented with in-depth interviews conducted in the period between 2004 and 2009. 1,561 veterans took part in the study, producing 1,508 usable completed questionnaires. Half of the group of participants belong to the older generation of veterans of deployments to the Dutch East Indies (1945-1949), Korea (1950-1954) and New Guinea (1950-1962). The other half is made up of the younger generation of veterans, who were deployed as service personnel in Cambodia (1992-1993) and the former Yugoslavia (1992-2004).

Evaluations of deployment experiences

This study shows that the majority of veterans are positive to very positive about their deployment experiences (see graph 1). Only 7% of the younger generation of veterans and 11% of the older veterans gave a negative response; 36% had both positive and negative responses as regards his or her deployment experiences. Comparatively speaking, veterans who look back on their experiences negatively feature more frequently among those who participated in combat operations (as opposed to peacekeeping operations) and who were deployed as conscripts (as opposed to professional and voluntary service personnel). These circumstances are more prevalent among the category of older veterans.

Graph 1: Evaluation of deployment experiences by category of veteran



Translation of Graph 1 (top down):

Left side

Younger generation of veterans

Older generation of veterans

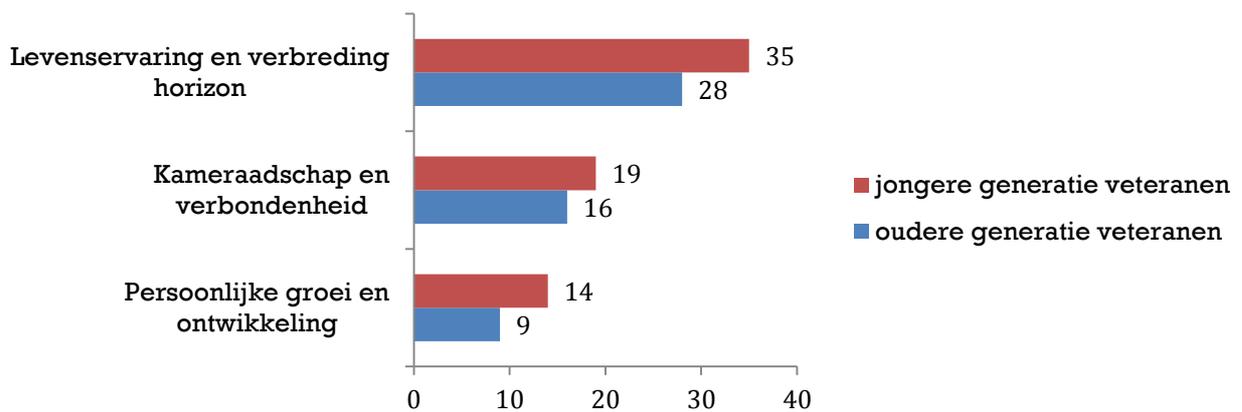
Right side (dark to light):

Very positive – positive – positive and negative – negative – very negative

Positive evaluations

Veterans were also able to indicate in the questionnaire what they found positive or negative about their military deployment experiences. Of the 1,508 veterans, 68% noted down a positive response. Of the older generation, this was 54%; of the younger generation this amounted to 81%. The analysis of their responses shows that personal changes received the most positive responses, with gaining life experience and broadening horizons being mentioned most frequently.

Graph 2: Top three positive evaluations of deployment experiences in percentages by category of veteran



Translation of Graph 2 (topdown):

Left side

Life experience and broadening horizons
Camaraderie and a sense of belonging
Personal growth and development

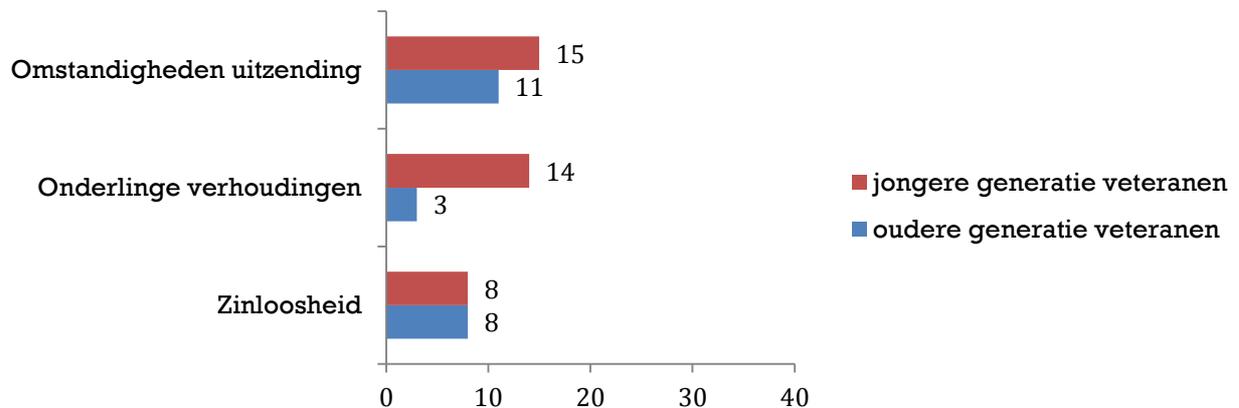
Right side

Younger generation of veterans (red)
Older generation of veterans (blue)

Negative evaluations

Of the 1,508, 51% noted down a negative response. The circumstances surrounding deployment took a clear first place in the negative evaluations, where veterans concentrated mainly on the shortcomings in preparations, the living conditions in the deployment area, the long time spent away from home and the low pay. Here, too, there are differences between the generations. For instance, younger veterans gave more negative responses concerning the conditions during deployment. They also made more frequent mention of the negative role of authorities and disrupted relationships.

Graph 3: Top three negative evaluations of deployment experiences in percentages



Translation of Graph 3 (topdown):

Left side:

Circumstances surrounding deployment
Relationships
Meaninglessness

Right side:

Younger generation of veterans (red) - Older generation of veterans (blue)

Personal resilience

The questionnaire survey also examined the extent to which resilience (self-confidence, optimism and personal control) contributes to a positive interpretation of military deployment experiences. It turned out that very resilient veterans found their experiences less threatening and also exhibit fewer post-traumatic stress responses. It also emerged that very resilient veterans are less likely to distrust others and the world in general, and experience more personal growth.

Finding meaning

Supplementary in-depth interviews with Cambodia veterans revealed that *military achievement* and *camaraderie* can help substantially to make sense of an unimaginable and dangerous reality, as can a *sense of fulfilment* as regards their achievements. The novel experiences generate a *personal benefit* for their careers and later lives. By contrast, the veterans interviewed with post-traumatic stress responses found it harder to put their experiences into perspective. Their experiences in Cambodia had not yet found a place in the image they had of themselves, others and/or the world around them.

Conclusion

The study shows that looking back positively on a mission fosters mental health and quality of life in the long term. It is also apparent that a perceived threat during a deployment is linked to mistrustful opinions of others and the world at large after deployment. Those mistrustful opinions, in turn, are linked to post-traumatic stress responses and a lower quality of life. Mistrustful opinions can prevent a person from seeking help and increase the risk of social isolation.

There is evidence to show that creating a positive image of the world which helps healthy adjustment and increases resilience is an important undertaking for veterans following deployment. Making service personnel and veterans aware of the positive impact of deployments improves their resilience (before a deployment) and ability to put things into perspective (after a deployment).

Greater awareness of the positive aspects of deployments among the public at large helps veterans to adjust after their return. Policy-makers and care professionals can support the process of finding meaning following a deployment by emphasising the positive elements. This will stop veterans from looking back negatively, something which can result in chronic post-traumatic stress responses. In the event of symptoms being presented, the recovery process must also be aimed at building up a support network to encourage coping and finding meaning.

Further information

This fact sheet provides general information about this study. For more information, consult: M. L. Schok (2009). *Meaning as a mission. Making sense of war and peacekeeping*. Delft: Publisher Eburon. (see: <http://dspace.library.uu.nl/bitstream/handle/1874/35944/schok.pdf?sequence=2>)

For more information, go to the following websites: www.veteranenloket.nl and www.veteraneninstituut.nl. You can also contact us by telephone (088 334 00 50) or by email (info@veteraneninstituut.nl).

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