

Combat and Commemoration

The public image of Dutch veterans and the influence of Afghanistan and Dutch Veterans Day

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Introduction

Veterans have often been deployed under difficult conditions and have risked their health and even their lives for a cause held in high regard by society. They therefore expect in return to be given care in the event of health problems and to receive social recognition for their efforts, risk and sacrifices. Although some Dutch veterans do not (yet) share the perception, earlier studies (IUS papers 2005 en 2007) reveal a growing appreciation by Dutch society for veterans and a generally positive portrayal of veterans by the Dutch media.¹ Up to 2007, social attitudes about veterans were steadily improving, probably due in part to an active veterans policy and the creation (in 2005) of a national veterans day. On the other hand, the traditional image projected in the media of veterans as heroes has since the 1980s been losing out to the image of veterans as victims with (mental) health problems.² This latter image is not likely to please many veterans.

This paper presents the findings of studies conducted since 2007 into images of veterans in Dutch society.³ Has the favourable trend in society's views on veterans, noted in 2007, continued its upward course and which images (the veteran as hero, perpetrator or victim) have been further reinforced or, alternatively, have receded into the background? Although it is not normally to be expected that social attitudes and media portrayal would change substantially over a time span of barely two years, this cannot be entirely ruled out, in

¹ Gielt Algra en Martin Elands, *Shifting images. The public image of Dutch veterans, past and present* (IUS paper 2005); Gielt Algra, Martin Elands en Jan Schoeman, *Dutch veterans in public opinion and press* (IUS paper 2007).

² *Shifting image*, p. 1-4

³ Manouk Goettsch, *Veteranen: een levend verleden. Een onderzoek naar de berichtgeving over veteranen rondom de regionale veteranendagen in de regionale weekbladen van 2007* (masterthesis, Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam, 2008);

Angelique van Tilburg, *De helden van de Veteranendag. Een onderzoek naar de beeldvorming over veteranen in de berichtgeving in de landelijke Nederlandse dagbladen rondom de Nederlandse Veteranendag 2007* (masterthesis, Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam, 2008);

Steffen Jongh, *Passie voor onze veteranen? Een onderzoek naar de berichtgeving over veteranen in de Nederlandse gedrukte media* (masterthesis Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam, 2009);

Angelique van Tilburg, *Held, dader en slachtoffer. Onderzoek naar de beelden van veteranen in artikelen in de Nederlandse dagbladen van 2008* (Angelique van Tilburg Journalistiek & Tekst, Rotterdam, 2009); Blauw Research bv/Stichting het Veteraneninstituut, *Veteranenmonitor 2008* (Rotterdam, 2008).

particular for the period of 2007-2009. The first reason is that in these years the Dutch Veterans Day has grown to become a successful (publicity-wise), large-scale event with a steadily growing influence on a national, regional and local level. The second reason is that Dutch service personnel in Afghanistan (Uruzgan) have since 2007 become increasingly involved in fighting the Taliban. For the first time since 1962, the Dutch armed forces are again fulfilling a traditional combat role on a larger scale.

Afghanistan and Veterans Day

Before discussing the findings of the studies into the appreciation for and the portrayal of veterans, it is worth saying more about the two above-mentioned changes in circumstances. The first of these is the Dutch Veterans Day, inaugurated in 2005. In our IUS paper of 2007 we reported briefly on this event and its initial effects on the image of veterans. So this development is not altogether new. But over the last two years, the Dutch Veterans Day has gained considerably more eminence and publicity. Between 2005 and 2008 the proportion of Dutch people aware of this national event grew from 79% to 88%.⁴ This was doubtlessly due to the intense coverage of the event by television, radio and the newspapers. The strongest evidence that the Dutch Veterans Day has gained a permanent place in Dutch society in just a few years is the rapidly rising number of Dutch municipalities which – following the example of the national celebration – organise a veterans day for (their own) veterans at a local or regional level. This number has risen from just a few dozen municipalities in 2005 to nearly 300 in 2009.⁵ Thus about 70% of all Dutch municipalities now organise a local veterans day. The central theme at both the national and the local events is to show society's appreciation for veterans. It is, therefore, only to be expected that this will have increased social appreciation for veterans (public opinion poll results) and reinforced the image of veterans as 'heroes'.

It is more difficult to make such a prediction on the basis of the second new development, namely the deployment of Dutch military personnel in the Afghan province of Uruzgan since 2007. Participation in this ISAF mission is by no means free from controversy. The military sociologist Jan van der Meulen was being quite realistic when he spoke of "relatively limited public support" for the mission.⁶ Various public opinion polls have shown that the proportions of supporters and opponents of this mission are both around 40%, with apparently a gradual rise in the number of opponents.⁷ Doubts as to the feasibility of the aim

⁴ *Veteranenmonitor 2008*, p. 19.

⁵ Documentatie Veteraneninstituut, Afdeling Dienstverlening.

⁶ Prof.dr. J.S. van der Meulen, "Stemmen over Afghanistan en de risico's van het vak", in: *Militaire Spectator* (maart 2009) p. 138.

⁷ Ministerie van Defensie, *Monitor Steun en Draagvlak. Publieke Opinie Missie Uruzgan* (juli 2009) p 7; www.eenvandaag.nl/opiniepanel, *Uitslag enquête 'Twee jaar missie Uruzgan'* (2008) p 1.; *Veteranenmonitor 2008*, p. 14.

of this mission, namely contributing to the reconstruction of Afghanistan, have gradually increased.⁸ This can be attributed to the fact that the operations in Uruzgan have assumed more and more the character of a combat mission. Dutch troops were involved in over a thousand clashes with Taliban fighters in the 2007-2009 period.⁹ Meanwhile, sixteen Dutch soldiers have been killed in the course of combat operations and many times more than this figure have been (seriously) wounded. A further five have died as a result of accidents (4) or suicide (1).¹⁰

Since 2007, the Dutch military operations in the Afghan province have been at the forefront of political and public interest. The political and public dissension about (prolonging) the military presence, the casualties among Dutch soldiers and the bitter struggle are all a guarantee for ongoing and intense media attention. With the fight against the Taliban, the Dutch armed forces are – for the first time in almost fifty years – performing traditional combat tasks on a larger scale, with all the associated highs and lows to be expected. This appeals to the popular imagination, as shown by the almost euphoric reporting on the victorious battle at Chora (June 2007). The firm actions in Afghanistan seem to have enhanced Dutch military prestige, that had taken a hard knock from the drama at Srebrenica in 1995. This is certainly the opinion of the Dutch public. Since even though the percentage of supporters of the Uruzgan mission has hovered at around 35% in the past year, the percentage of people claiming to be proud of the Dutch soldiers in Uruzgan is no less than 61%.¹¹ This shows that many opponents of the mission are nevertheless proud of the soldiers in the field. However, the question is whether this pride in the present military personnel also extends to the veterans. Does the fighting in Uruzgan increase social appreciation for veterans and does this have a positive influence on the portrayal of veterans in the media, or does the substantial opposition to the mission in Uruzgan have the opposite effect?

Veterans and public opinion (2000-2008)¹²

Thanks to the fact that since 2000 the Veterans Institute has commissioned annual public opinion polls on veterans, it is possible to establish whether any striking changes in public opinion have taken place recently. This would not seem to be the case as regards familiarity with Dutch military actions, as can be seen from the following table of the most well-known missions.

⁸ *Monitor Steun en Draagvlak. Publieke Opinie Missie Uruzgan* (juli 2009) p 18; *Uitslag enquête 'Twee jaar missie Uruzgan'* (2008) p. 3.

⁹ *The Economist* (print edition), March 12th 2009, *Afghanistan's Uruzgan province. The Dutch model.*

¹⁰ www.nos.nl/nosjournaal/dossiers/afghanistan

¹¹ *Veteranenmonitor 2008*, p. 18

¹² *Veteranenmonitor 2002, 2004, 2006, 2008.*

Table 1 Familiarity with deployment of the Dutch military

| | 2002 | 2004 | 2006 | 2008 |
|----------------------------|------|------|------|------|
| WW II 1939 – 1945 | - | 96% | 94% | 94% |
| Indonesia 1945 – 1949 | 95% | 92% | 90% | 90% |
| Korea 1950 – 1955 | 43% | 41% | 37% | 42% |
| Lebanon 1979 – 1985 | 61% | 58% | 63% | 64% |
| Srebrenica 1994 – 1995 | 91% | 92% | 85% | 90% |
| Afghanistan 2001 - present | | | 88% | 93% |

People maintain their high degree of familiarity with the four missions that most capture public imagination, while at the same time being the most contentious, i.e. the Second World War, the decolonisation war in Indonesia, the peace operation in the Bosnian enclave of Srebrenica, and the recent operation in Afghanistan. Awareness of the apparently less appealing military operations in Korea and Lebanon seems to have increased somewhat, due in part to the fact that they are regularly mentioned in connection with the reporting on Afghanistan. This was, for example, the case for a television interview with a Korea veteran arising from a broadcast about two Dutch victims of friendly fire in Uruzgan. Taken as a whole, however, there are no substantial changes in familiarity relative to the figures for 2004 and 2006.

Such continuity is less evident with regard to the question of whether the deployment of the Dutch military was justified or not. Table 2 shows clearly that the number of Dutch people who qualify the military actions in Korea, Lebanon, Srebrenica and Afghanistan as 'justified' has dropped significantly over the last two years. The initially rising line was thus reversed around 2006. Although impossible to substantiate with this sort of study, it seems likely that the social opposition to the Dutch military involvement in Afghanistan (Uruzgan) has had an adverse affect on opinion on past military operations. The only striking exception to the falling trend is the decolonisation struggle in Indonesia, but public opinion on this conflict has always been changeable.

Table 2 Justification vs no justification for deployment of Dutch military

| | 2002 | 2004 | 2006 | 2008 |
|--------------------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| W W II 1939 -1945 | | 95% vs 01% | 91% vs 01% | 91% vs 01% |
| Indonesia 1945-1949 | 36% vs 25% | 55% vs 23% | 47% vs 26% | 50% vs 24% |
| Korea 1950-1955 | | | 41% vs 32% | 34% vs 35% |
| Lebanon 1979-1985 | 44% vs 20% | 49% vs 23% | 51% vs 24% | 43% vs 27% |
| Srebrenica 1994-1995 | 56% vs 22% | 56% vs 24% | 56% vs 23% | 50% vs 27% |
| Afghanistan 2001-present | | | 48% vs 31% | 45% vs 32% |

Although over the past two years the Dutch public have become more critical in respect of justification for military operations, this was definitely not accompanied by any decrease in appreciation for the military personnel (veterans) deployed in these operations. In fact, looking at these operations as a whole, we can even observe a slight rise in appreciation in the last two years. And compared to the year 2002, this rise is significant, as can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3 Great or very great appreciation for deployed military personnel

| | 2002 | 2004 | 2006 | 2008 |
|----------------------------|------|------|------|------|
| Indonesia 1945 – 1949 | 52% | 63% | 60% | 63% |
| Lebanon 1979 – 1985 | 57% | 66% | 72% | 68% |
| Srebrenica 1994 – 1995 | 59% | 65% | 67% | 68% |
| Afghanistan 2001 - present | - | - | 72% | 73% |

On the basis of all these public opinion figures on veterans for the 2002-2008 period, we can conclude that there have been no great changes over the past few years. Although since 2006 the Dutch have become somewhat more critical about the various military operations, they have, nevertheless, shown increasingly more appreciation for the military personnel deployed in them.

The image of veterans in the newspapers (2000-2008)¹³

In addition to the public opinion figures discussed above, the portrayal of veterans in the media forms a further indicator for the public image of veterans in the Netherlands. The studies carried out into this subject, mainly by students of media & journalism of the Erasmus University of Rotterdam, examined, amongst other things, whether newspaper reports tended to stereotype veterans. In other words, were the veterans in the reports described as 'heroes', 'perpetrators' or 'victims'. Two of these three stereotypes were, incidentally, further subdivided in some studies. The 'perpetrator' stereotype was subdivided into perpetrators (accused of committing crimes) and guilty parties (accused of culpable conduct). Within the 'victim' stereotype, two studies differentiated between victims with health complaints and victims of disregard (veterans for whom appreciation was withheld for many years). In the

¹³ Eva van Beveren, *Held, dader of slachtoffer? De veteraan in de media* (masterthesis, Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam, 2007);

Steffen Jongh, *Passie voor onze veteranen? Een onderzoek naar de berichtgeving over veteranen in de Nederlandse gedrukte media* (masterthesis Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam, 2009);

Angelique van Tilburg, *Held, dader en slachtoffer. Onderzoek naar de beelden van veteranen in artikelen in de Nederlandse dagbladen van 2008* (Angelique van Tilburg Journalistiek & Tekst, Rotterdam, 2009);

2008 survey, these categories of perpetrators and victims were each combined under a single header. Table 4 summarises the results of three studies into stereotyping.

Table 4 Stereotyping of Dutch veterans in Dutch newspapers

| Stereotype | 2000-2002 (N=376) | 2003-2005 (N=514) | 2008 (N=91) |
|---------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|-------------|
| Hero | 32% | 36% | 37% |
| Perpetrator/guilty party | 16% (6% / 10%) | 19% (6% / 13%) | 27% |
| Victim (health/disregard) | 52% (30% / 22%) | 44% (19% / 25%) | 35% |
| No stereotyping | N=135 | N=32 | N=84 |

Within the categories of reports found to contain stereotyping, the image of veterans as 'heroes' and 'perpetrators' gained ground, while the image of veterans as 'victims' lost the dominant position it had held in the 1980s and 1990s. All in all, the reporting on veterans in the media now seems to be more balanced. It should be noted, however, as regards the image of veterans as 'perpetrators', that in 2008 there happened to be a great deal of negative publicity surrounding the aftermath of the drama in Srebrenica. In that year, Bosnian widows and mothers of Muslim men murdered in 1995 took legal action against the Dutch government and this generated considerable negative publicity for the Dutch service personnel of that time, who were unable to prevent the Bosnian-Serb massacres.¹⁴ Since veterans are the subject of just some 200 newspaper articles a year, forming a relatively minor news category, an incident of this kind can generate a sizeable shift of opinion if just a single year is surveyed. We can look to the studies into the portrayal of veterans in the media in the years 2009 and 2010 in order to discover whether the unexpectedly powerful 'perpetrator' image seen in 2008 was just a blip.

The observed gains for the image of veterans as 'heroes', on the other hand, do seem to be ongoing and, moreover, consistent with the increasing appreciation for veterans being openly expressed in Dutch society, such as during the Dutch Veterans Day. And the fading image of veterans as victims seems also set to continue. Although not established in percentage terms in the study of newspaper articles in 2008, it can be asserted that since 2005 the image of veterans as victims of disregard (for whom appreciation was unjustly withheld) has receded into the background. For the years 2005-2008, this does not seem to

¹⁴ Angelique van Tilburg, *Held, dader en slachtoffer. Onderzoek naar de beelden van veteranen in artikelen in de Nederlandse dagbladen van 2008* (Angelique van Tilburg Journalistiek & Tekst, Rotterdam, 2009). Extra bijlage. Overzicht van de artikelen die direct of indirect over veteranen gaan en in 2008 in de Nederlandse dagbladen zijn verschenen.

apply to the image of veterans as victims with health problems, since in 2008 over 60% of respondents still subscribed to the (incorrect) proposition that the majority of veterans are psychologically damaged.¹⁵ An overview of the subject matter of the reports on veterans (which also featured in reports without stereotypes) reveals some of the previously noted trends in the portrayal of veterans.

Table 5 Subject matter of newspaper articles

| | | 2003-2005 | 2008 |
|--------------------------|--|-----------|------|
| Blame/offences | | 17% | 15% |
| Health | | 12% | 24% |
| Disregard | | 12% | 6% |
| Recognition/appreciation | | 10% | 30% |

Other general conclusions to be drawn from the three studies are that the image of veterans as heroes continues to be linked to older war veterans (particularly from the Second World War), while younger veterans are more often portrayed as health victims.¹⁶ The image of veterans as perpetrators continues – not surprisingly – to be closely linked to the failed and – partly for this reason – controversial military actions in Indonesia (decolonisation) and Srebrenica.¹⁷ In addition, media attention is quite evenly divided over the older war veterans (1940-1962) and the younger veterans of peace operations (1979 to the present).¹⁸ It is therefore to be expected that fewer and fewer people will automatically associate veterans with old men. A final point to catch the eye is that 25% of all reports on veterans in 2008 appeared in June (the month in which the Dutch Veterans Day is held) and that Afghanistan, with a score of 17%, is the most frequently mentioned mission.¹⁹ This last point is noteworthy in as far as this recent and still ongoing mission has not yet produced a great number of veterans. We shall return to this later.

Influence of Veterans Day

As already mentioned, the organisation of the Dutch Veterans Day each year since 2005 has created a mediagenic event enabling the policy makers to promote recognition for veterans, and thus, they expect, stimulate society's appreciation for veterans. The supposition that the

¹⁵ *Veteranenmonitor 2008*, p. 18.

¹⁶ *Held, dader of slachtoffer?*, p. 56-59 en 64-66.

Passie voor onze veteranen?, p. 41 en 47-49.

Held, dader en slachtoffer, p. 10-13.

¹⁷ *Held, dader of slachtoffer?* P. 60-62.

Passie voor onze veteranen?, p. 44-47.

Held, dader en slachtoffer, p. 10-13.

¹⁸ *Held, dader en slachtoffer*, p. 10.

¹⁹ *Held, dader en slachtoffer*, p. 6-8.

Dutch Veterans Day would have a positive influence on the image of veterans in the media was the reason for a separate study into the reporting on veterans in the context of the Dutch Veterans Day, again carried out by students of the Erasmus University.²⁰ As described in the previous IUS paper (2007), the first study into this subject compared the reporting in 1988-2006 on Liberation Day, which for many years – with its veterans parade in Wageningen – formed the most prominent ‘veterans event’, with the reporting in 2005 and 2006 on the Dutch Veterans Day.²¹ Amongst other things, this comparison led to the conclusion that the Dutch Veterans Day paid ample attention to all generations of veterans and not (almost) solely the veterans of the Second World War.²² It was also noticeable that the reporting on the Dutch Veterans Day devoted strikingly more space to the ‘hero’ stereotype (approx. 35% of the articles), with far less space for the ‘victim’ stereotype (13%), and that the ‘perpetrator/guilty party’ stereotype was hardly mentioned at all.²³

These 2007 findings gave a first indication that the reporting on the Dutch Veterans Day compared favourably with the general reporting on veterans (during the rest of the year). Two subsequent final degree research projects were designed to provide more decisive results on this aspect. The first study looked at reporting on veterans in the national daily newspapers during the period around which the Veterans Day was held (16 June – 13 July 2007, 56 articles).²⁴ Just as had been found in earlier Veterans Day studies, the 56 articles referred to a broad spectrum of wars and missions. The older ‘war missions’ were mentioned 34 times and the more recent peace missions 81 times.²⁵ This means that most attention was paid to the younger veterans. A not entirely unexpected, but nevertheless noteworthy finding of this study was that the hero image and the victim image were represented more or less equally prominently (34% and 37% respectively), whereas the perpetrator image was given a back seat (5%) during this period.²⁶

A comparable study examined 319 articles on veterans published in the regional daily newspapers (218) and local newspapers (101) in the weeks around the Dutch Veterans Day.²⁷ In contrast with the national dailies, the regional and local newspapers tend to concentrate their reporting more on the older veterans (WW II, Decolonisation War in

²⁰ Manouk Goettsch, *Veteranen: een levend verleden. Een onderzoek naar de berichtgeving over veteranen rondom de regionale veteranendagen in de regionale weekbladen van 2007* (masterthesis, Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam, 2008);

Angelique van Tilburg, *De helden van de Veteranendag. Een onderzoek naar de beeldvorming over veteranen in de berichtgeving in de landelijke Nederlandse dagbladen rondom de Nederlandse Veteranendag 2007* (masterthesis, Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam, 2008);

²¹ Judith Plantinga, *Dat mag in de krant. Een onderzoek naar de berichtgeving over veteranen rond bevrijdings- en veteranendag* (masterthesis, Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam, 2007)

²² *Dat mag in de krant*, p. 38-39.

²³ *Dat mag in de krant*, p. 40-44.

²⁴ *De helden van de Veteranendag*.

²⁵ *De helden van de Veteranendag*, p. 47.

²⁶ *De helden van de Veteranendag*, p. 55-58.

²⁷ *Veteranen: een levend verleden*.

Indonesia and the Korean War), but here as well there is a good mix of missions.²⁸ Another difference is that the regional and local reporting produces fewer stereotype images of veterans. In the 117 articles which did feature such images, the hero image and the victim image dominated in these newspapers as well (both around 50%), while the perpetrator image hardly appeared at all (less than 1%).²⁹ Comparing the results of both Veteran Day studies with the results of the general study into the image of veterans (2000-2005 and 2008), we see clearly that the image of veterans as perpetrators is practically absent in the reporting around Veterans Day and the image of veterans as heroes is given more prominence. Social appreciation in the period around Dutch Veterans Day is the dominant theme in the regional and local newspaper articles, just as in the national dailies.³⁰ The studies also clearly demonstrate that the Dutch Veterans Day generates a great deal of favourable publicity on a national and – even more so – regional/local level.

This large volume of largely positive publicity about veterans during the Dutch Veterans Day period has undoubtedly played a part in the steady growth since 2002 in the appreciation for veterans, visible in the public opinion statistics (see Table 3). Responses from random samples of the Dutch population questioned in 2008 by the Behavioural Sciences Unit (Ministry of Defence) further revealed that three quarters of the population considered that veterans deserved open recognition and that the Dutch Veterans Day was an excellent way of expressing this recognition.³¹ So, there is evidently no lack of public support for the Veterans Day. Moreover, 17% of respondents in that study consider that appreciation for veterans has increased as a result of the Dutch Veterans Day. Only 2% claim that it has diminished.³²

Although the positive effect of the Dutch Veterans Day on the public perception of veterans and the appreciation for veterans has been clearly demonstrated, the question still remains as to whether the veterans themselves share this positive opinion. So we researched this issue in the past years by conducting a detailed questionnaire survey. The results of the written survey conducted among 2,400 veteranpass holders after the 2008 Dutch Veterans Day provide the most up-to-date picture. The evaluation revealed that the veterans greatly appreciated the Veteran Day's programme and that no fewer than 70% of them claimed to have noticed that the event led to more recognition for him or her as a veteran.³³ In previous years, this percentage had 'only' been 35% (2005), 48% (2006) and

²⁸ *Veteranen: een levend verleden*, p. 33.

²⁹ *Veteranen: een levend verleden*, p. 34-35.

³⁰ *Veteranen: een levend verleden*, p. 39.

³¹ Ministerie van Defensie/Defensie Personele Diensten/Gedragwetenschappen, *Publieke Opinie Nederlandse Veteranendag 2009* (Den Haag, 2009) p. 10.

³² *Publieke Opinie Nederlandse Veteranendag 2009* (Den Haag, 2009) p. 11.

³³ Majoor drs. P.M. Huls-van Zijl (Veteraneninstituut), *Evaluatie Nederlandse Veteranendag 28 juni 2008. Resultaten van de enquête onder veteranenpashouders* (Doorn, 2008) p. 16.

61% (2007). So the Dutch Veterans Day leads not only to a positive image (more hero and less perpetrator) and greater public appreciation, but among veterans also reinforces their feeling of being appreciated. And that is, after all, what it's all about.

The influence of the conflict in Afghanistan

The fighting in the Afghan province of Uruzgan has not yet produced many veterans. After all, in the Netherlands you are only a veteran if you have taken part in a war or a peace operation and have left the military organisation. Consequently, most reporting on the mission in Afghanistan has no direct relationship with veterans and has been excluded from the 2008 media study. Nevertheless, Afghanistan already plays a prominent role in media reporting, which relates directly or indirectly to veterans. We already saw that the Afghanistan mission was the most frequently mentioned mission in the reporting during 2008. 40 articles (17% of the total) mentioned Afghanistan (Uruzgan). Almost half of these articles dealt directly with veterans. Moreover, almost half of the articles were published in May and June 2008, i.e. in the weeks prior to or directly after the Dutch Veterans Day.³⁴

It is striking that it is not the 'hero' stereotype that dominates in these forty articles, but rather the 'victim' stereotype (in 18% and 40% of the articles respectively).³⁵ With 50%, the subject of health is clearly in the lead. Social recognition comes a good second with 24%. It is quite understandable that soldiers who are physically injured in battle are given a prominent place in the veteran articles on Afghanistan. But it is quite surprising that so much attention is in this early stage being paid to the (potential) psychological consequences of combat. Apparently, journalists consider that the experiences in Uruzgan and their possible consequences fit neatly into the negatively-charged debate about young veterans with mental health problems. The reports from the United States about the many veterans who, after returning from Iraq or Afghanistan, commit murder, doubtlessly also play a part in this. Reports of this kind tend to reinforce the image of veterans with psychological disorders, including the risk that these will lead to (violent) excesses.

Discussion

The wide-ranging studies discussed in this paper clearly show that the Dutch Veterans Day has given rise to a greater social appreciation for veterans and to a more balanced portrayal of them in the newspapers, which also show that the image of veterans as heroes is gaining ground at the expense of their image as victims. As regards the direct influence of the military operation in Afghanistan, we can argue on the basis of the opinion poll results that this results in a greater appreciation for veterans, but also that the media portrayal focuses

³⁴ *Held, dader en slachtoffer*, p. 28-29.

³⁵ *Held, dader en slachtoffer*, p. 27-28.

more on (mental) health problems. This is not all there is to be said on the subject of how the fighting in Uruzgan is influencing appreciation and portrayal. We should also consider the likely indirect and not immediately visible influence. First of all, the military operations in the Afghan province of Uruzgan probably arouse interest in the Dutch Veterans Day and in the veterans themselves. The link between these two things is quite clear. The official speeches during Veterans Day often refer to the current situation in Afghanistan. In addition soldiers back from Afghanistan are awarded their commemorative medal right in front of the cameras during the Veterans Day ceremonies and a captain of the Commando Corps (Green Baretts), who was awarded the highest honour for bravery in the Netherlands for his courageous actions in Afghanistan, was a prominent guest at the Dutch Veterans Day in 2009. His presence attracted a great deal of (media) attention, as it had been over fifty years since this highest honour had last been awarded to an individual member of the armed forces.

Another form of indirect influence is that the numerous battles against Taliban fighters contribute to boosting the (inter)national prestige of the Dutch armed forces, which had been severely battered by 'Srebrenica'. This will undoubtedly also benefit the appreciation for veterans in general. The many combat missions in Afghanistan have almost certainly enhanced the prestige of the young generation of veterans. Combat experience is no longer the prerogative of the older generation of war veterans. The prestige attached to it is certainly recognised within the armed forces. In 2008 and 2009, the number of servicemen and women about to depart for Uruzgan who indicated that they would consider themselves as veterans after their return was far greater than that at the beginning of 2007 (when things were still pretty quiet in Uruzgan).³⁶ It seems that they – just like most older war veterans – believe that you can only really call yourself a veteran after you have taken part in real fighting. This matches the traditional way of thinking which lays a close link between the (visible) sacrifices made and the degree of appreciation and respect won. The American military sociologist Wilbur J. Scott has shown, however, that social appreciation for service personnel and veterans also depends to a large extent on the degree to which society judges the conflict to have been just and successful.³⁷ So, in order to establish the exact influence of Afghanistan on the appreciation for veterans and on their image, we shall probably have to be patient for a few more years. To be continued.

³⁶ Based on conversations of Gielt Algra with (young) soldiers during lessons in cultural awareness (2007-2009).

³⁷ Scott, WJ, *French veterans of the war in Algeria: a description and comparison with American veterans of the Vietnam War* (IUS-paper 1993).