

Veteran Under Construction

Identification Processes Among Dutch Veterans Who Served in
Military Missions in Lebanon, Srebrenica, and Uruzgan

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*In an emergent world
'fully understood by no one,'
there is no safe distance at which to stand
MacLeish, 2021*

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List of abbreviations

English abbreviation	Dutch abbreviation	Name
44 MIB	JWF 44 PAINFBAT	44 Mechanised Infantry Battalion
DFF		De Facto Forces
FOB		Forward Operation Base
IDF		Israeli Defence Force
IED		Improvised Explosive Device
ISAF	ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
NATO	NAVO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
OMF		Opposing Militant Forces
PLO		Palestine Liberation Organization
PRISMO		<i>Prospective Research in Stress-Related Military Operations</i>
PTSD	PTSS	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
SFIR	SFIR	Stabilisation Force in Iraq
TFU	TFU	Task Force Uruzgan
UN	VN	United Nations
UNIFIL	UNIFIL	United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon
UNPROFOR	UNPROFOR	United Nations Protection Force
VST	VST	Veterans Search Team
WW1	WOI	World War I
WW2	WOII	World War Two
	ABP	Public Civil Pension Fund
	LZV	National Health Care System for Veterans
	NIMH	the Netherlands Institute of Military History
	NIOD	the Netherlands Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies
	SDV	Veterans Service Foundation
	YPR	Armoured Infantry Fighting Vehicle

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Prologue

What does it mean to be a veteran?

Yes, I do feel like a veteran. I have requested the Veterans Pin, I receive the veterans magazine, and I enjoy reading that. When they talk about military deployments on the television, I listen with extra attention. I have not been to a Veterans Day yet. Last year, I had tickets for an Air Force Veterans gathering. But for some reason... I have not gone there yet; I don't know why. I don't know, I don't know... It is not fear, not at all, I am extremely interested indeed. I have wondered what it is. Two years ago, I watched the first Veterans Day, I really sat down in front of the television. And I feel I am enough of a veteran to go there, but for some reason I have not gone yet. I don't know why that is. *Fragment of interview with Cambodia veteran, deployed in 1992, interviewed in 2007 at the age of 45.*¹

Interviewer: Do you view yourself to be an East Indies veteran?

Veteran: No.

Interviewer: What is your association with this expression?

Veteran: My association with that expression is that they have introduced it way too late. We have been demobilised, and that was that. This whole veterans stuff, veterans card et cetera, that emerged fifteen or twenty years ago, but the first couple of decades after... nothing was done about it. (...) It is not a mark of honour. The armed forces are not important in the Netherlands. That lies in the attitude of the Dutch: it costs too much money.

Interviewer: Do you want to change that?

Veteran: No, why? I had the most amazing time during service.

*Fragment of interview with Dutch East Indies veteran, deployed in 1948-1949, interviewed in 2006 at the age of 81.*²

I am a veteran, yes. Why? Because I confirm to the standards the Dutch government has defined for that. Also, I am a veteran because I have accomplished a certain task, a military task, that I feel proud of. I am a veteran because I have experiences that fit into that image. Whether I feel like a veteran? No, not always. In daily life, no. But on May 4th, during the Commemoration of the Dead, then I stand proudly. All dressed up, in my suit, wearing my beret and my Veterans Pin. *Fragment of interview with Kosovo veteran, deployed in 1999-2000, interviewed in 2006 at the age of 36.*³

1 Source: Interview Collection the Netherlands Veterans Institute, www.veteranenvertellen.nl, 57.

2 Source: Ibid, 568.

3 Source: Ibid, 1066

If I talk to people about the fact that I am a veteran, let's say, at work: 'I am going to the Veterans Day, I am going to stand in the row of honour (*erecouloir*) at the day of the King's speech, during the Commemoration of the Dead on the Dam, last year I was a stand-by for the laying of a wreath', then you see people looking at me like: 'huh, you, a veteran, how is that possible? You are not old at all.' You notice that people are not familiar with deployments. (...)

Interviewer: Do you attach value to the veteran status and expressing that status?

Yes. I do attach value to that. Generally speaking, there is relatively little interest, although I do see, with Veterans Day for instance, during the last two to three years, there is more public interest. I have been to Wageningen [on Liberation Day], I found that the most impressive parade. Primarily directed at the older veteran, but still, young veterans are also applauded, there you find appreciation. However, in daily life, you actually don't find it. *Fragment of interview with Former Yugoslavia veteran, deployed in 1992-1993, interviewed in 2010 at the age of 41.*⁴

These citations from the Interview Collection of the Netherlands Veterans Institute are all responses to whether the interviewee 'felt like a veteran'. The citations show the subjectivity of respondents and reflect a variety of attitudes regarding how veterans identify with the name and category of veteran. They also illustrate the complexity of this feeling. For instance, one can feel like a veteran, but still not declare oneself as such. One may have had the time of his life when serving, but state not to feel like a veteran at all. While feeling like a veteran is a private sentiment, it is endorsed, strengthened or diminished by context and the perceived attitude of others. Ceremonial celebrations or commemorations can make identifying as a veteran significant, while it is of less significance in daily life. Formal policy making, views of others and interest of outsiders caused the Dutch East Indies veteran not to identify as a veteran, while for the Kosovo veteran these aspects foster identification as a veteran. So, on one hand, each veteran relates to being a veteran in a unique way, as it means different things to them in different contexts. However, they have in common that they attach a certain meaning to being a veteran, and this meaning is constructed through both their personal sentiments, and how they feel others view veterans. Hence, feeling like a veteran, acting like a veteran, and showing this to the outside world is differentiated — in other words, veterans' attitudes are as heterogenous as veterans themselves.

4 Source: Ibid, 1221

While the differences in the way the veteran status played a role in different lives attracted my attention during my work as a researcher at the Veteran Institute, I also observed a sense of unity among veterans. I visited veteran gatherings and memorials, events during which I, as an anthropologist, was always intrigued by the use of specific language, particular customs, and rituals. So, although what it means to be a veteran could differ per individual, there was some common ground among the veterans attending these events. This is where I started to wonder what it meant to be a veteran and how an identification as veteran is constructed through interactions with others.

While the state has formally defined who is a veteran in the Netherlands, little is known about processes of meaning making around the veteran status among veterans themselves. Yet, veterans are addressed as such by numerous initiatives taken to meet their needs in health, finances, and societal recognition and appreciation. What does being a veteran mean to the people for whom this specific policy is developed? And how do they express this meaning in interaction with the wider society? Various studies have implied how self-images and public images of soldiers and their mission are constructed in interaction with each other during deployment as well as shortly after the deployment (Molendijk, 2018; Sion, 2006; Sørensen, 2015; Tomforde, 2005). The question I seek to address in this study, however, is how this process unfolds among veterans who have left the service. In order to gain a better understanding of the identification of veterans, this study has examined the interrelation between how veterans identify as a veteran and their perceptions of how society perceives and views them as veterans.

In this context, I compared the narratives of veterans who participated in three missions that differ in terms of the period, military context, and public perception, namely Dutchbatt in Lebanon, Dutchbat in Srebrenica (former Yugoslavia) and Task Force Uruzgan in Afghanistan. This study describes the similarities and differences in the way individuals of these three different veteran groups identify as veterans through their narratives and descriptions of societal perceptions towards them. The findings are based on 47 interviews in which veterans narrated their life stories, with particular attention to their military service and deployment, how this affected their lives, and how they identified at the time of the interview. In a broader perspective, this research will provide more insight into how societal views on particular groups, as perceived by group members, influence identification processes of individuals in this group and vice versa.





1

Veterans and identification, narrative, and interaction

In practice, anthropology and the military are a rare combination. As a legacy of the colonial era, when anthropologists' analyse divided people into so-called 'races', anthropologists have ever since been very cautious to study the apparatus that gives the state the power to use violence. That the military is still an ambiguous subject in anthropology, showed Pedersen (2019) and Sørensen (2019) when writing about experiencing moral judgments of colleagues as well as of their own ethical struggles during their studies. Gusterson (2007) described how anthropologists' choices of fields of study have been steered by (civil) wars. While the dynamics of wars and consequences for societies and ethnic groups were thoroughly examined, the military itself has remained understudied. Meanwhile, both the military and veteran groups exhibit a rich subculture and dynamics of identity formation. Gusterson advised to 'analyse the ways militarism remakes communities, public cultures, and the consciousness of individual subjects' (p. 165), for instance through studying 'veterans groups' (ibid.). Veterans in this sense are of special interest as they incorporate their military past in their civilian present.

This study focuses on how veterans make meaning around their veteran status, what it means for them to be a veteran, what they think it may mean to others and how they interact with these others to find a consensus on what it means to be a veteran. The central question of this study is: what are the similarities and differences in the way veterans of three veteran groups identify as a veteran, and what role do societal views on veterans, as experienced by these veterans themselves, play in this process? I will answer this question by drawing on 47 interviews conducted with Lebanon, Srebrenica and Uruzgan veterans, as well as on observations made during veteran gatherings and commemorations. In this introductory chapter I first elucidate on who I am referring to when writing about veterans, describing how this label came into being in Dutch society and what characterises this population in the present day. In the second section I introduce the theoretical framework on which this study is based, and in the third section, I outline my fieldwork and the data collection and analysis methods I used. The chapter finishes with a chapter summary of this book.

1.1 VETERANS IN THE NETHERLANDS: AN INTRODUCTION

Surveys among the Dutch public show that about half of the Dutch population does not know what a veteran is (Bot & Konings, 2019; Konings & Baart, 2020). Internationally, the definition of what constitutes a veteran differs from country to country, and even within countries (Truusa & Castro, 2019). I therefore begin by clarifying the definition I adhere to — in the context of the Netherlands — throughout this book:

The serviceman or servicewoman, former serviceman or servicewoman, or former conscript of the Netherlands Armed Forces, or the Royal Netherlands Indies Army, as well as any former conscripted members of the Merchant Navy who served the Kingdom of the Netherlands in time of war or who took part in a mission to maintain or promote the international rule of law insofar as that mission was designated by order of Our Minister ('Kamerstuk 32 414: Wet van 11 februari 2012 tot vaststelling van regels omtrent de bijzondere zorgplicht voor veteranen (Veteranenwet) [Law of 11th February 2012 for decree on regulations surrounding the extraordinary duty to provide care for veterans (Veterans Act)]; 2012).

In this section, I describe how this formal definition of a veteran was created in the Netherlands, beginning by providing an overview of the history that preceded it, particularly in relation to the Dutch East Indies veterans. I then briefly describe the development of veteran policy and its implementation throughout the years, before summarising what previous studies on Dutch veterans and Dutch public opinion have taught us about the veteran population and how Dutch society, in general, views veterans.

Dutch East Indies veterans: Catalysts for veteran policy

While other European countries developed their veteran policy after the World War One (WW1), the Netherlands lagged a little behind. Because of the neutral status of the Netherlands during WW1, the Netherlands did not experience the consequences of wounded and traumatised soldiers having to reintegrate as a civilian into society to the extent that other countries did. So, while in other European countries First World War veterans became catalysts for veteran policy, this was not the case in the Netherlands (Elands, Van Woensel, & Valk, 2019; Klinkert, 2008; Van der Meulen & Soeters, 2005). Although the Netherlands and its armed forces did participate in the World War Two (WW2), these veterans did not function as catalysts for veterans policy either. The reason for this is likely because most Dutch WW2 veterans fought for only a short time during the German invasion, and the years of occupation that followed had more impact on both the Dutch population and these veterans than the invasion itself. The process to a formal veteran definition and policy in the Netherlands was set in motion, instead, by veterans of the war that ensued WW2, namely the war of independence in the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia after independence). Dutch East Indies veterans' demands to be recognised intertwined with growing public recognition for people suffering from war experiences, nationally and internationally, and this led to a campaign for a Dutch veteran policy.

Hence, to understand contemporary veteran policy — as well as what it means to be a veteran — it is necessary to understand the specific historical context of the Dutch East Indies veterans. During the WW2, the Dutch East Indies colony was occupied by Japan.

This occupation was still in place when German occupation ended in the Netherlands in May, 1945. The first Dutch soldiers to leave for the Dutch East Indies were thus on a mission to liberate the colony from Japanese occupation. However, once the Japanese left, in August 1945, it transpired that there were dissenters in the Dutch East Indies demanding independence from the Netherlands — which had no intention of giving up its colony. What followed was a guerrilla war that lasted until the Netherlands recognised Indonesia as an independent country in December 1949. By then, 200,000 soldiers had fought on the side of the Netherlands in the Dutch East Indies, many of whom were conscripts. Of those soldiers, some 5,000 to 6,000 did not survive (Netherlands Veterans Institute, 2020b; Van der Meulen & Soeters, 2005).

Over the years since the war, there have been East Indies veterans who have demanded recognition (Elands, 2000), such as to be included in the commemoration of WW2 on May 4th, on the grounds that the war in the Dutch East Indies arose out of WW2. The Dutch government was at first unwilling, probably because the decolonisation war had taken place overseas and the veterans had not returned as victors (Elands et al., 2019) and, more importantly, because of the moral ambiguity surrounding the war, in which the Dutch had used excessive violence to hold on to their colony (Limpach, 2016; Oostindie, 2015; Oostindie, Hoogenboom, & Verwey, 2018; Van der Meulen & Soeters, 2005). Exact numbers are not available, but estimates of Indonesian deaths during this war range from 100,000 to 200,000, both numbers strikingly higher than the casualties on the Dutch side (Van der Meulen & Soeters, 2005).

When the war ended, the Netherlands was left with nothing to be proud of. Not only did it lose the colony, it was lost through years of bloodshed. Of course, this contrasts sharply with the pride felt about soldiers who had defended the nation against German attacks, or the resistance fighters who had risked their lives to resist the German oppressor — these were the WW2 veterans who were commemorated on the 4th of May. However, after the Dutch East Indies veterans had been lobbying for over a decade, the government gave in — although it did not make much effort to make this decision public — and from 1961 onwards, all Dutch veterans from all wars were remembered on May 4th (Raaijmakers, 2017). It took until 1988 for the war in the Dutch East Indies to have its own national monument.

The 1980s was also the decade in which the number of Dutch East Indies veteran reunions started to grow. In writings based on the Veterans Interview Collection (*Interviewcollectie Nederlandse Veteranen*) (De Reuver, 2021; Duel, 2021), as well as in military history reflections (Elands, 2000), it is described how the veterans themselves initiated these, feeling that they wanted to see each other again because of their stage in life: some were about to retire, others were already retired and their children had grown up. They found themselves having time to look back on their lives and, in doing so, came to realize that their deployment to the former colony had had an immense impact on

the rest of their lives. Many found that, in common with other veterans, they had experienced positive as well as negative consequences. Psychological problems featured prominently in the negative consequences and, as the veterans reunited and compared experiences, they discovered similarities in the psychological issues they were still dealing with. This led to a campaign for veteran recognition and health care.

These specific claims were also influenced by other societal processes that occurred in the 1980s. For instance, the development of the concept of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in psychology in the 1980s had a great impact on awareness about deployment-related mental health issues (Withuis, 2002). During this period, veterans of the Vietnam War in the United States were receiving much attention for the traumas they had suffered — traumas which Dutch East Indies veterans recognised themselves. On the national level, in the 1980s, Dutch soldiers returning from United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) — the UN-mission in Lebanon in which the Netherlands took part from 1979 until 1985 — were offered mental health care, and this had an impact on the East Indies veterans as they perceived that the aftercare available to them after their deployment had been wholly insufficient.⁵ Decades later, East Indies veterans still felt largely ignored by the government (Algra, Elands, & Schoeman, 2003; Duel, 2021; Elands, 2000). These factors all influenced demands for specialised health care for veterans. Furthermore, the war in the Dutch East Indies and its excesses were a regular subject of debate in the media at this time, and many Dutch East Indies veterans felt they had become scapegoats for a dirty war. They believed it was their right to be recognised and appreciated for their service instead (Elands, Van Woensel, & Valk, 2019). Care and societal recognition and appreciation thus became the two pillars of veteran policy.

Policy, practices and the ‘veteran world’

Veteran policy was constituted in 1990, and since then has had two key foci: stimulating recognition and appreciation for veterans, and providing health care for veterans in need (Algra, Elands, & Schoeman, 2003; Elands, Van Woensel, & Valk, 2019).⁶ Veterans were initially defined as ex-soldiers who had been in service under war circumstances or deployed on peace missions. The Netherlands took part in several international peace missions in the three decades that followed, which resulted in new veterans when soldiers who had been on one or more deployments left the armed forces. The first organisation tasked with implementing veterans policy was the Veterans Service Foundation (SDV), which was founded in 1991, following the advice of the Commission for the

5 Duel (2021) cites the booklet ‘In Een Notedop’ [‘In a Nutshell’] that was handed out to East Indies veterans upon arrival in the Netherlands. It comprised 90 pages of material services and just three pages of information on the possible negative effects of deployment and where to get help in case these effects occurred.

6 Hoofdlijnen van het veteranenbeleid: Nota ‘Zorg voor veteranen in samenhang’ (Kamerstukken II, Vergaderjaar 1989-1990, 21490, nr.1) [Outline of the veterans policy: Note ‘Coherent care for veterans’], 1990

Societal Recognition of Veterans. The SDV was set up to function as a central reference point for veterans, who could apply for a veterans identification card which gave them access to benefits such as discounts for, for example, recreation facilities. They could also receive a veterans pin upon request, which was (and still is) in the shape of the letter V. The SDV provided short term psychological support and information to veterans, and liaised with other war victim associated organisations, disseminating knowledge about veterans' issues.

In 1997, a comprehensive study was undertaken on veterans' mental health issues and their need for care (Bramsen, Dirkzwager, & Van der Ploeg, 1997). Two of the key recommendations coming out of this study were to establish an institute tasked with communicating veterans' experiences to the Dutch public, and to address the provision of professionalised health care (Duel, 2019; Elands, 2005). Based on this advice, the Veterans Institute was established in 2000. The Institute included the former SDV as well as a new department tasked with stimulating societal recognition and another concerned with keeping an up to date overview of research and learning regarding (Dutch) veterans.

Shortly after the establishment of the Veterans Institute, the Netherlands Veterans Day Foundation was established by the Ministry of Defence. In 2005, this foundation organised the first Netherlands Veterans Day in The Hague. As well as the national day, regional and local versions have also been organised by municipalities. The Netherlands Veterans Day foundation has also been active in stimulating awareness about veterans' stories in society, for example through launching a project on veterans giving guest lectures in schools⁷ and disseminating stories about veterans in the media. As all these activities show, right from its conception, the Netherlands Veterans Day Foundation has been focused on the policy pillar of stimulating societal recognition and appreciation.

Concerning the other pillar of veteran policy, the provision of health care for veterans, the National Health Care System for Veterans (LZV) was operationalised in 2007, providing integrated care for veterans. Eleven care providers, military as well as civil, are connected within this network. This chain of providers is thus geared to deliver the most suitable care to a veteran who is seeking treatment. At the time of my interviews, an important participant in this care system, The Base Foundation (*De Basis* in Dutch), employed social workers throughout the country and had hospitality facilities in which veteran groups could stay for week or weekend programmes of sport activities, art activities and trauma therapy.

In 2012, the Veterans Act was passed to secure the two pillars of veterans policy in law. It also adjusted the definition of veteran. Whereas in the earlier definition veterans were always ex-soldiers, after the 2012 Act a soldier became a veteran as soon as they

7 The project on guest lectures was later adopted by the Veterans Institute, and renamed 'Veterans in the Classroom'.

arrived at the location of deployment. It was no longer necessary to leave the forces in order to receive the status. The Veterans Act also pointed out that the implementation of veteran policy needed a more coherent approach. It was found that veterans were unclear about where to go to when they needed help. Therefore, a special department was established in the Veterans Institute dedicated to being the central point of communication for veterans — *het Veteranenloket*. A veteran seeking treatment would contact this department and be referred to a care coordinator at the Public Civil Pension Fund (ABP), who would advise the veteran on their rights for health care and financial aid based on their medical conditions (Muller, 2019, pp. 236-244).

The Veterans Act also emphasised the need for a more proactive and preventive policy. Instead of leaving it as the veteran's responsibility to look for treatment when in need, it was stressed that the state had a duty to care for its veterans and to meet their needs as fully as possible. For example, instead of veterans having to apply for a veterans card or veterans pin themselves, these were presented to them upon return from deployment, and instead of only helping veterans who experienced trouble after deployment, more effort was invested in selection procedures before deployment, as well as in the provision of mental health care while on deployment. Also, the Veterans Act mentioned that it was the responsibility of the state to provide care for veterans' close relations, if they faced issues as a result of a veteran's experiences. A Veterans Ombudsman was appointed to check whether the system was indeed working for the veterans' benefit (Muller, 2019, pp. 248-250). The Veterans Decree followed, in 2014, in which health care and financial settlement agreements for veterans were further elaborated. The duties of the state towards its veterans were made more explicit and included recognition and appreciation for veterans, duty of care before and during deployment, duty of care after deployment, income provision related to care, and a system for the registration of veterans (Duel, Truusa, & Elands, 2019; Muller, 2019).

In 2016, the veterans policy was evaluated by the Ministry of Defence. First, it was concluded that veterans were, overall, satisfied with the implementation of the policy, although there needed to be a little more guidance regarding the transition from the armed forces into society. Second, the evaluation demonstrated that there were too many different organisations concerned with the implementation of veterans policy. To make this implementation more efficient, it was proposed that several organisations be merged into one (*Evaluatie Veteranenbeleid [Evaluation Veterans Policy]*, 2011-2016). Three foundations — the Veterans Institute, the Netherlands Veterans Day, and the Base — and the coordinating office of the National Health Care System for Veterans, the care coordination of the ABP, and the coordination of the buddy support system of the Veterans Platform (see next paragraph) were merged into one organisation, the Netherlands Veterans Institute, on January 1, 2021.

While policies concerning veterans in the Netherlands developed, Dutch veterans themselves did not sit still when it came to organizing themselves. First, over a hundred associations provide for reunions of a particular unit of the armed forces, in which besides veterans also (former) soldiers belonging to this unit without the veteran status can participate. Second, specific veteran associations arrange meetings and events, and look after interests of veterans while helping veterans in need. These organisations are founded and led by veterans and/or their relatives and can be targeted to all veterans, or directed at specific veteran groups based on mission, department or unit of the armed forces. Third, veteran associations can target specific aspects or interests. They for instance bring together veterans who were wounded during the mission, veterans who make motor cycling tours together, and veterans who want to contribute to a non-governmental organisation, either in the country of deployment through development work, or in the Netherlands. Online, there are numerous Facebook communities and forums in which veterans can meet digitally. Not only veterans themselves can become a member of a veteran organization: often, partners and (surviving) relatives are also welcome to join. In 1989, the Veterans Platform was founded, which was meant to function as an umbrella organization for various veteran associations, 67 in 2020 (Veteranen Platform, 2020). The Veterans Platform looks after the interests of veterans and is also involved in the development of the buddy support system, that has been formalized by the Veterans Platform since 2012.⁸ Beside associations, there are the veterans meeting centra, in which veterans can meet, exchange stories and connect with a buddy when they experience psychological issues. Also, over the country, there are about seventy veterans café's, which are regular café's where veterans can meet each other once a week or month. Also, so-called 'return trips' are organized by veterans themselves in which veterans return to the country they were deployed to. To summarise, the 'veteran world' in the Netherlands is flourishing and as a veteran, there are many ways to become involved in this world (Scheffer & Bijkerk, 2019).

What is known about Dutch veterans

Since 1940, the Netherlands has deployed over 675,000 soldiers during three wars and over 100 peace missions. The majority of war veterans deployed during the Second World War, the independence war in the former Dutch East Indies and New-Guinea and the war in Korea are now

8 Every veteran or individual who feels affiliation with veterans and is not suffering from severe problems can be trained to act as a 'buddy' for troubled veterans. It is assumed that telling their story to the buddy can relieve the struggling veteran. Plus, the buddy can lead the way to professional health care if needed. The assumption is that this would lower possible barriers to look for professional help. The buddy support system among veterans who have left the Armed Forces has existed informally for decades within veteran associations (see also De Reuver, 2021). Through the system of the Veterans Platform, veterans in need and their potential buddies can find each other. The system formally became part of the Netherlands Veterans Institute in 2021.

deceased. Current estimations state that the Netherlands nowadays has 105,350 veterans (Ministry of Defence, 2021a). Over half of them have participated in one or more international peace missions since 1979 (Netherlands Veterans Institute, 2021).

This section provides an overview of what has already been established in previous studies regarding how Dutch veterans look back on their missions, what is known about veterans' health and well-being, what percentage of veterans feel like a veteran and how they express this, and what percentage feels appreciated by the public. I then compare these findings with the results of a yearly survey on veterans among the Dutch population.

In general, studies have demonstrated that the majority of veterans look back on their missions with positive feelings (Schok, 2009), and have positive associations of camaraderie and satisfaction (Reijnen & Duel, 2019; Van Wijngaarden & Meije, 2015). A minority looks back with mixed feelings, and only a small percentage appears to look back exclusively negatively (Cozzi et al., 2018; Dirksen, 2015; Duel & Dirksen, 2016; Reijnen & Duel, 2019; Netherlands Veterans Institute, 2017a) with sentiments such as shame and frustration (Reijnen & Duel, 2019; Van Wijngaarden & Meije, 2015). Consequently, these studies have found that most veterans indicated that deployment influenced their lives in a positive manner (Reijnen & Duel, 2019). Being able to give meaning to the mission they were on related to them experiencing personal growth as a result of the deployment (Schok, 2009). This does not mean that veterans did not experience any difficulties connected to their deployment. For instance, half of the veterans participating in a study of Blauw Research (2012) indicated to experience difficulties in adjusting to their life back home after deployment, and one in eight needed a year or longer to feel completely integrated.

Much research has been directed at the psychological issues veterans experience as a result of deployment (see, e.g. Bramsen, Dirkzwager, & Van der Ploeg, 1997; Dirkzwager & Bramsen, 2008; Klaassens et al., 2008; Rietveld, 2009), particularly Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (see, e.g. De Vries et al., 2002; Eekhout et al., 2016; Engelhard & McNally, 2015; Engelhard et al., 2007; Harari et al., 2009) and, recently, moral injury (Molendijk, 2018, 2020; Ter Heide, 2020). Yet, surveys among veterans have shown that a minority of the veterans — around 10% — have indicated that they need special care or support because of issues related to deployment. When asked to grade their life, veterans in a study by the Veterans Institute and Trimbos gave average scores of 7.9 on a scale of ten (Reijnen & Duel, 2019; Van Wijngaarden & Meije, 2015). Hence, overall, studies have found that most veterans are doing well, and only a minority are experiencing (severe) problems with regards to, for instance, psychological, financial and social issues.

Regarding identifying as a veteran, the main focus of this study, a yearly survey among Dutch veterans sent out by the Veterans Institute from 2014 to 2018, demonstrated that almost two thirds of the respondents said they ‘felt like a veteran’, while just over half said they felt connected to other veterans. The ‘veteran feeling’, therefore, is not entirely equal to experiencing a bond with other veterans. Also, while three quarters of respondents said they felt proud to be a veteran, only just over a quarter said that they actively expressed their veteran status in their daily lives (Cozzi et al., 2018; Dirksen, 2015; Duel & Dirksen, 2016; Netherlands Veterans Institute, 2017a). This implies that there are veterans who feel proud of their veteran status, yet do not actively disclose that they are veterans.

The same survey studies have found that nine out of ten veterans find it important to be recognised and appreciated (Cozzi et al., 2018; Dirksen, 2015; Duel & De Reuver, 2014; Duel & Dirksen, 2016; Netherlands Veterans Institute, 2017b). In each year that this survey was held (2014–2018), the appreciation felt from society in general scored the lowest, while appreciation from close acquaintances was experienced the most (see table 1.1).

Table 1.1 Veterans’ sense of feeling appreciated⁹

	‘I feel (very) appreciated by...	Neutral / I don’t know	I do not feel appreciated (at all) by...
... the state / Ministry of Defence	41-49%	31-39%	15-21%
... the media	30-38%	44-59%	9-25%
... society	24-30%	47-53%	18-28%
... close acquaintances	45-52%	34-46%	9-14%

However, a survey conducted in 2020 found that 80% of the Dutch public said they appreciated its veterans, and only 3% said they did not. In this survey, respondents had to choose between characteristics they viewed as applicable to veterans, and 90% chose ones with positive connotations such as dutiful, helpful, brave, courageous and proud. Statements with more negative associations, such as having psychological problems, being sensation-loving and violent were chosen by 61%, 21% and 17% respectively (Konings & Baart, 2020). These results are comparable with the figures from previous years (Blauw Research, 2013; TOS, 2014, 2015) and represent a generally positive attitude in Dutch society towards veterans. However, when asked whether they ever showed veterans appreciation, only 33% of respondents affirmed, and when this 33% was asked to describe what they did to express their appreciation, they generally used

9 Cozzi et al., 2018; Dirksen, 2015; Duel & De Reuver, 2014; Duel & Dirksen, 2016; the Netherlands Veterans Institute, 2017

phrases such as ‘showing respect’, without providing any more details. Furthermore, as said in the beginning of this section, about half was not aware of the formal definition of a veteran (Konings & Baart, 2020). Given this, it is not surprising that less than a third of veterans said they feel appreciated by society, and a fifth to a quarter said they did not to feel appreciated by society (see table 1.1).

These results raise important questions, such as how can veterans expect to be appreciated by society if they do not express their veteran identity openly? Or do they hesitate to express this because societal appreciation is not really articulated or evident? The results also raise the question of what ‘feeling like a veteran’ actually entails. How do veterans see themselves and how do they wish to be seen by others? What does identifying as a veteran mean and what role do the opinions of others play in this process?

1.2 PROCESSES OF IDENTIFICATION — THEORETICAL EMBEDDEDNESS

In this section, I first go into the theoretical debate on identity that engendered the term identification process. I then explain why narrative and memories are key to how a sense of identity is formed, and argue that identification as a veteran is a showcase example of a sense of identity that is built on the past. Finally, I discuss some of the studies conducted on the narrative and (self) image of soldiers and veterans that served as inspiration for this study, before presenting some key aspects of the literature on perceptions of sameness and differences among veterans.

What identification entails

The debate on identity in the social sciences that led to the concept of identification is a theoretical journey that started almost one hundred years ago. Although they did not use the word identity, anthropologists Mead (1928) and Benedict (1934) wrote about individuals behaving in the way that was expected of them based on the role they chose within the larger community. These individuals could often choose from a range of options, and members of a community could see who individuals thought they were by the way they behaved. In psychology, Erikson (1956) named this process of choosing who you are and therefore knowing how to behave as identity, which he viewed as being formed during the teenage years — although he believed that it could be adjusted later in life. Erikson was very influential in the development of the concept of identity, which he saw as a perception of the self, providing guidance on how to act throughout one’s lifetime, and also providing a sense of continuity during one’s lifetime: even when context changes, the self remains the same central base to rely on. It was Erikson’s view of identity that was brought into anthropology in the 1960s. Anthropologist

Goodenough (1963) made a distinction between personal and social identity. Personal identity encompassed perception of the self and one's behaviour based on personality, while social identity was about the relationships one held with others in society, and socially expected behaviour based on these relationships (Van Meijl, 2010).

Goodenough built on the work of social psychologist Goffman (1956), who viewed society as a collection of individuals depending upon each other to find their place within the social system. Goffman viewed the social world as a stage on which individuals performed in a certain way in order to show their audience, the other members of their society, who they were. In what he calls the back region, behind the stage, people prepared their performance and, guided by the reactions of their audience, adjusted this performance until they obtained the desired reaction. Anthropologist Barth (1969) elaborated on this by bringing this theory to a group level: he argued that groups form their own identity mainly on the boundaries of the group. By negotiating who is in and who is out of the group, it becomes clear what this group is perceived to be. This theory challenged the idea that everyone naturally views an identity in the same manner, suggesting, instead, that it was precisely at points of inconsistency that identity issues are formed and articulated. Therefore, when studying identity, it is important to study what happens at the edges of a group (Barth, 1969; Jenkins, 2014c). Barth also argued that individuals can cross the boundary of the group, at times belonging, at other times belonging elsewhere. In this way he pointed out the possibility of multiple identities, the role of context, and the ability of the individual to continually choose how he or she identifies (Barth, 1969).

Barth's theory challenged the until then prevailing assumption that a group of persons obviously had the same identity when they shared a common history and culture. Instead of seeing identity as a given characteristic, which was permanent and static through time, identity was now viewed as constructed by social interactions and fostered by common interests. This new insight inspired literature on ethnic and national identities (De Vos & Romanucci-Ross, 1975; McCready, 1983; Nagel, 1994; Smith, 1994). Anthropologist and political scientist Anderson (1983) connected Barth's ideas to globalisation, viewing space as no longer necessary for determining who is in or who is out. For example, in a nation state people feel tied to their fellow citizens, even if it is impossible to know every individual personally. Anderson defined this as an imagined community. Not only in the context of the nation-state, but also worldwide people can feel connected to each other because they believe they share the same values.

Hence, identity is constructed by imagination and interaction. Through this interaction, the meanings of an identity are debatable (Barth, 1969; Eriksen, 2002; Jenkins, 2014c). Outsiders will react to the stories or behaviours of insiders, who will, in turn, react to that, etcetera. Because they are interacting with many different 'others', one person can construct multiple identities, each relevant to different contexts (Battaglia,

1995; Holland et al., 2001; Quinn, 2006). This process of identifying can be done by both insiders and outsiders of a group. How others view a person or a group matters, as this can have consequences (Jenkins, 2014c). The more the views of insiders and outsiders on a particular identity differ, the more relevant it becomes for the identified group to actively influence the way outsiders view them (Carbaugh, 1996).

This means that forming an identity is a dynamic process, which is never completed. Brubaker & Cooper (2000) argued that since identity is continuously changing, it is not useful as an analytical concept. Identity, they argue, is a category of practice because it is used by the research population as something real. However, it should not be treated by scientists as something real because it is not a category of analysis. I agree that identity is not something people have, it is something they construct. It is therefore not static but dynamic. Although it may be a social reality to the research population, it should not be researched as if it is. Rather, it is something people create and treat as a reality. However, I follow Brekhus (2008) in his argument that the process of identity formation is useful to study, since it provides insights into the construction of social realities, informal rules and regulations, and how people shape a society within which they have different positions and hold different perceptions or opinions (see also Jenkins, 2014c). Therefore, in this study, I follow Hall (1996, p. 6) in choosing the term identification over identity, because the word identity suggests the permanent state of a passive individual or group, while identification implies a process with actors doing the identifying (see also Brubaker & Cooper, 2000; Jenkins, 2014c). Identity, in this perspective is a temporary state in this process.

It is important to highlight, for the purpose of my study, that, although veteran policy making arose through the campaigning of veterans who identified as such before a formal label existed, nowadays veterans are not a spontaneously formed group. They are individuals who come under the same formal label. This can be likened to what the influential sociologist Weber (1947, 1968) described as ethnic identity. Weber viewed ethnic identity as a belief in commonality among individuals. This belief could foster social structuration, just as social structuration could stimulate the belief in commonality. Although veterans are certainly not an ethnic group, Weber's theory is indeed relevant in this context. The creation of the veteran label was catalysed by a group of individuals who had something in common: their military history influencing their current lives. The belief that this shared past caused similar reactions and needs led to the formalisation of policy making directed specifically at veterans. While the label was initially generated because of beliefs in a common ground, nowadays it is not necessary to share these beliefs in order to obtain the veteran status. Nowadays, veterans are externally identified and addressed as veterans by the state and by the implementers of veteran policy, which is expressed through materials such as the veterans pin and the Veterans Card. This external identification (Jenkins, 2014c) has consequences in that veterans must

make sense of what being a veteran actually means. In other words, the social structuration reflected in veteran policy and in the Veterans Act and Degree, fosters the belief that veterans have something in common that is or may be of utmost importance.

Still, it is the individual veteran who chooses whether and how to identify as a veteran. As I have said, a deployment does not have to lead to someone 'feeling like a veteran' or feeling connected to other veterans. An individual veteran can choose whether or not to identify with a label and may shift position in different contexts. The meaning of the label can also differ from person to person and from context to context. Different individuals can have different ways of identifying and can connect different actions to this process of identification. This can range from an always present representation to making this identification only apparent when relevant in a particular space and time (Brekhus, 2008). So, although veterans all carry the same formal label, what it means to be a veteran can be different for every individual, and for every individual it can change through time and context. In other words, there are many different interpretations of what it means to identify as a veteran.

Whereas early approaches to studying identity focused on perceptions of sameness, in the present day identification is seen as a belief in commonality among several individuals, which may unite them in a group, as well as a belief in difference from others. Without persons or groups being different, similarity loses its value. This also means that identifying is always a social process, even when it occurs on the individual level. Others are needed in order for an individual as well as a group to experience sentiments of sameness and difference simultaneously (Jenkins, 2014c; Van Meijl, 2008).

Baumann (2004) described how similarities and differences are articulated through grammars of identity. He distinguishes three grammars of identity. The first is the grammar of Orientalisation or Reversed Mirror-Imaging, based on the work of Said (1978) where group A defines group B by comparing characteristics of group B and naming what makes them different from their group A. The second grammar is segmentary, based on Evans-Pritchard's work (1940), and describes how what is 'us' and what is 'them' differs by context and by what other parties are involved in in any given context. For example, two groups can think of themselves as different, until a third group joins them which is even more different. At that point, the two groups identify as the same and the third group as the different party. Cohesion therefore depends on what other party is in the picture within a certain context. The third grammar Baumann mentioned is encompassment, where a group determines that others may think they are different from their group, but, deep down, are in fact just the same. The others may try to exclude themselves from the larger group, but the group nevertheless includes them in their discourse when they are talking about 'us'. These grammars can change with context and depending on the group using them (Baumann, 2004).

To summarise, this section described four important elements of the term identification process as used in this study. First, the process of identification needs social interaction. Second, ways of identifying can differ with context: depending on who one is interacting with, where, and when. Third, identifying is about beliefs in similarity and difference, on the personal level between individuals as well as on the collective level between groups. Fourth, as a result of the first three elements, identification is not a static social fact; it is continuously under construction by social actors. It is not a characteristic people have; it is something people do. Hence, when we talk about identification processes among veterans, we talk about a dynamic, context-dependent process of social interaction, based on perceptions of similarities and differences, which are both the catalysts as well as the consequences of the social structuration that is veteran policy.

Narrative and memories: Bringing the past into the present

Veteran identification is built upon experiences that occurred in the past. Identifying as a veteran therefore goes hand in hand with narrating memories. People can construct and transform their identities and position themselves in a particular way in the social world by telling a story (Adler & Leydesdorff, 2013; Davis & Manderson, 2014; McAdams, 1988; Wood, 1991). Through stories, people make sense of life events and of themselves. Rather than being exact representations, experiences people narrate are a combination of their own and others' experiences, coloured by their own interpretation. Together, they form a story that has the dual function of explaining what happened in the broader context (Fivush, Booker, & Graci, 2017; Grysman & Mansfield, 2017) and making sense of the narrator's current reality (Davis & Manderson, 2014; Kilshaw, 2006). Storytelling therefore gives meaning to life in general and to identification in particular (Bruner, 1990).

Recollecting memories is an essential part of telling a story (Argenti & Schramm, 2009; Ewing, 1990; McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007; Said, 2000). Although the past does not change, memories are subjective and therefore not static: they are fluid and can change over time (King, 2000). Each time an event is recalled, the memory of this event changes a bit because of the associations and context within which it is recalled. The reaction of the audience with whom the memory is shared can also reshape the memory and the way it is recalled the next time (Fivush, Booker, & Graci, 2017). The broader context and the narratives shared by others influence the personal memories used in the personal life story, just as personal memories, shared with the public, can transform collective memory (Halbwachs, 1992 [1954]). Therefore, memory does not say as much about the past as it does about the present. It is a social process (Argenti & Schramm, 2009).

A life story, which includes all kinds of smaller memories, illustrates how someone has reacted to external events and, therefore, who this person is (Giddens, 1991). While a person may have multiple selves, in a narrative one presents oneself as a whole, convey-

ing what Ewing calls (1990, p. 251) 'the illusion of wholeness'. In order for a life story to have this explaining effect, it needs to be coherent and logical. However, Giddens added that in reality life stories are often not that coherent or logical, so some effort is required from the storyteller to make the story seem comprehensible. If a person succeeds in doing this, they are likely to feel pride and greater self-esteem. If not, shame results from the fear that a narrative is not good enough (Giddens, 1991, pp. 71-73). When sharing their life story with others, a person may 'try-out' whether the narrative comes across as logical and cohesive and whether it serves to communicate a particular way of identifying. As McAdams and McLean describe in their work on narrative identity:

Through repeated interaction with others, stories about personal experiences are processed, edited, reinterpreted, retold, and subjected to a range of social and discursive influences, as the storyteller gradually develops a broader and more integrative narrative identity. (...) Through meaning making, people go beyond the plots and event details of their personal stories to articulate what they believe their stories say about who they are. Storytellers may suggest that the events they describe illustrate or explain a particular personality trait, tendency, goal, skill, problem, complex, or pattern in their own lives (McAdams & McLean, 2013, pp. 235-236).

They conclude by saying that the context in which the story is shared, matters: it influences the choices made concerning which events are told. These choices depend on which way of identifying is important at that place and in that time of conversation, as well as on whom one is talking to. Even during a conversation, identification — and therefore the autobiographical events that are being recounted — can shift (Hammack, 2008; McAdams & McLean, 2013; McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007; McLean & Syed, 2015). However, it is the function of the narrative to suggest that there is stability and coherence in one's life. All the events the narrator selects to tell are recounted in such a way that an evolving identification follows out of these events in a logical way (McAdams & Guo, 2015). If important listeners agree with the story that was told, this story becomes internalised and can become an important part of identification through narrative. In other words, the story itself becomes part of the narrator's perception of their social world and their position in it (McAdams & McLean, 2013). This is not necessarily a consciously thought-out action, orchestrated by rationality, yet it is shaped by cultural and social dynamics. Hence, narrative serves to deal with the past as well as to construct and demonstrate present identity.

The past of the veteran: The military

Here I examine in more detail the first element of the life story that all veterans have in common: the military. The military as an institution has a great impact on its members and their families, both in terms of time — 24/7 during deployment — and space — working overseas for months as part of the job, staying at bases physically separated from society, sometimes staying overnight at these bases, and being dependent on institutional decision making regarding where one's next place of work will be (Cooper et al., 2017; Soeters, Winslow, & Weibull, 2006; Thompson et al., 2017). The military's mission is primarily external defence, or to protect the nation's democracy (Burk, 2002). Preparing the defence of the nation against intruders requires preparing for and using organised violence in the name of the state. The state gives legitimacy to the military for its purpose of using violence, although the use of violence is seen as a last resort. As it can make use of legitimised violence, the military institution is guided by different moral rules than those applied in society. As Wilson (2008) puts it:

armies differ from other institutions in that their primary mission entails a readiness to take life and destroy property (p. 22).

The military is organised in such a way that, when warfare appears necessary, it operates as effective and efficient as possible (Wilson, 2008). Group cohesion plays a vital role in this organisation, as the institution is built upon what Emile Durkheim (Durkheim, 1933 [1893]) defined as 'mechanical solidarity' (Soeters, 2018a). Everyone has their own task, and this task needs to be done properly, in order for the military machine to work. Even though servicemembers in the Netherlands rarely work under actual war circumstances, they have to be able to switch to those circumstances at any time. That is why they are trained in strict routines. Sense of camaraderie is particularly important for carrying out these routines effectively (Elder Jr & Clipp, 1988; Soeters, 2018a). This sentiment of bonding is created through the basic training one has to accomplish when entering the military, which can be viewed as a rite of passage (Ambaum & Vermetten, 2019; Molendijk, 2020; Soeters, 2018b). Recruits are separated from family and friends and stripped of their regular clothing. They have to go through thorough training to prove they are worthy of group membership, which they are put through by senior members of the group (Soeters, 2018b). Once they have endured this liminal period, they go through a 'baptizing' ceremony (ibid, p. 93) in which they are accepted as a new member of the military community. These rituals strengthen a soldier's identification with the military and stimulate group cohesion because other members have to undergo the same rite of passage simultaneously before they can be integrated in the military (Binks & Cambridge, 2018; Christensen et al., 2018; Demers, 2011; Hale, 2008; Molendijk, 2020; Mouthaan, Euwema, & Weerts, 2005; Sion, 2006; Smith & True, 2014; Soeters, Winslow,

& Weibull, 2006; Wilson, 2008). This means integrating into a subculture, in the sense that the military is made of people who share a way of life, and typical behaviours and customs (Blackburn, 2016; Meyer, 2015; Soeters, 2018a; Wilson, 2008). As most members enter the military at a young age — the age at which, according to Erikson (1956), the formation of identity takes place — they are partly 'raised' within the military.

What Soeters defines as intraorganizational loyalty and being 'inner-directed' (2018b, p. 26) further strengthens military subculture and soldiers' identification with the institution. First, judgements on whether or not moral or justifiable boundaries have been exceeded are made internally, and the military is averse to judgements made by civilians (Molendijk, 2012; Soeters, 2018a; Winslow, 1998). Internal justice is formalised within the military organisation through institutions, such as the military police and military courts of justice (Soeters, 2018b). Second, inner direction is evident in the relative isolation of the armed forces: they are physically separated from civilian areas; one needs to show identification to enter; and the bases provide the soldiers with necessities such as restaurants, health practitioners, and sport facilities. Inner direction is also visible on the level of communication, in the sense that the armed forces are not very open to the outside world about what they are doing. This is understandable as revealing too much about their activities may endanger soldiers on location and their mission. Army bases are not visible on Google Maps for this reason. Both intraorganizational loyalty and separation from the civil world reinforce the close ties servicemembers feel towards each other (Soeters, 2018a).

I here highlight some typical aspects of military culture. The military uniform serves as an embodied symbol to distinguish oneself from civilians, and symbols on the uniform, such as stripes and stars, show fellow soldiers where one stands within the military. In this way, the uniform gives servicemembers information on how they should address one another, based on whether the rank is higher, lower or equal (Hale, 2008; Soeters et al., 2006). This code of conduct streamlines taking action as a group (Hale, 2008; Soeters, 2018a). When a higher rank is obtained, the promotion is celebrated through a ritual. Other military symbols include mascots and monuments, which represent common beliefs and are central in ritual commemorations.

Typical social behaviour for a serviceperson is to mock other departments or groups, which are always shown at a disadvantage to the department or group to which the serviceman belongs (Klep, 2019b, p. 105). This is visible, for example, in how Marines talk about army personnel, and vice versa, and soldiers who stay 'inside the wire' versus the ones 'outside the wire', meaning those inside or outside the forward operating base (FOB), during deployment. Such social behaviour reflects a playful struggle over who is the truest warrior. For instance, a soldier on the ground is seen as more entitled to that label than a pilot dropping bombs from the air (Thompson et al., 2017). Even among the soldiers on the ground this hierarchy is visible: the infantrymen, who run a higher risk of

direct combat contact, view themselves as superior to artillerymen, whose place is behind the infantrymen and therefore at a greater distance from the enemy (Sion, 2006).

In a recent Dutch study on treatment-seeking behaviour among soldiers, informants described a ‘strong worker’ culture, in which decisiveness and mental and physical strength are valued above all else. These values come together in a so-called ‘can-do’ mentality, which has little tolerance for any signs of weakness or insecurity (Bogaers et al., 2020, p. 4). Another typical element of military culture is the preference for certain values and contrasting those with values in society. A grammar of Orientalisation becomes visible when soldiers compare their own values and characteristics with those of civilians (see table 1.2).

Table 1.2 Grammar of Orientalisation¹⁰ among soldiers¹¹

Military	Civilian
Physical endurance and toughness	Lazy, weak
Mental endurance and toughness	Emotional / Quick to give up
Action-oriented	Preference for talking
Team-spirit	Individually minded
Keeping calm under extreme circumstances	Not having to deal with extreme circumstances
Willing to run an elevated risk	Not having to run an elevated risk

Hence, the language of identification in the military echoes both the process of ‘othering’ described by Said in his *Orientalism* and the segmentary grammar proposed by Bauman. This identification knows several layers, and which layer is relevant depends on the social context. For example, in the broader societal context the infantryman is a serviceman, and therefore different from the average civilian. On the level of the military, he is an army soldier, and consequently differs from a navy sailor. On the level of the army, he identifies as infantryman, and is therefore different from an artilleryman.

To summarise, joining the military has an impact on its members’ identification process. It has a strong influence on the ways their workers look, talk and act, and the military thrives on social cohesion. One can imagine that this is fostered even further during deployment, when soldiers live together and have to deal with each other day and night, for months on end, rarely leaving the base to be in the civil world, except when on furlough.

10 Baumann (2004) specifying the idea of Said (1978)

11 Based on Binks & Cambridge (2018); Bogaers et al. (2020); Cooper et al. (2018); Demers (2011); Hale (2008); Mout-haan, Euwema, & Weerts (2005); Smith & True (2014); Soeters, Winslow, & Weibull (2006); Thompson et al. (2017); Wilson (2008)

The past of the veteran: Deployment

Veterans formally become veterans as soon as they arrive at the location of deployment. To gain the status, it does not matter whether or not they have been in firefighting, have been wounded, or even if they have completed the entire deployment. The first deployment often takes place during what psychologists call the 'reminiscence bump' (Glück & Bluck, 2007; Holmes & Conway, 1999; Rathbone, Moulin, & Conway, 2008) between fifteen and thirty years of age. Events that occur during that particular age bracket are remembered more vividly and are seen as the most formative for the self. The experiences a serviceman can go through during deployment add to the importance of this event in their life story. These experiences do not necessarily have to involve possibly traumatic events, such as fearing for their life, having to kill an enemy, or losing a buddy. The experience of being in a foreign country for the first time can of itself make a great impression, as can the experience of camaraderie during deployment, or witnessing an exotic cultural custom for the first time. Also, the shifts from the peaceful home to war, and back again, can cause crises in world view and therefore in the serviceman's life story, especially if a deployment did not meet the expectations the serviceman had before going on deployment (Broesder, 2011; Demers, 2011; Finley, 2011; Lomsky-Feder, 1995; Sion, 2006). In her study on the reintegration into US society of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans, Demers (2011) showed explicitly how servicemen need to find out who they are when they return from deployment and discover that they have changed. This implies that a deployment can make a great impression on a person even if is not considered traumatic and, for that reason, can influence the perception of self.

That being said, studies also suggest that the greater impression events make, the more they influence processes of identification. Memories of traumatic events represent the 'watershed events' that often mark a change in this process of identification (Brekhus, 2008). Instead of contributing to a continuum in who you are and how you view the world, traumatic memories cause a breach and change your perceptions of who you are and the world around you (Broesder, 2011; Demers, 2011; Finley, 2011; Lomsky-Feder, 1995; Sion, 2006). For the traumatised, it can feel like they live in two places simultaneously: the one in which the trauma took place and the present day. They can experience these as two different worlds and struggle to integrate their traumatic experience into their contemporary identity and narrative (Argenti & Schramm, 2009). Individuals who do succeed in integrating trauma in their narrative often describe their self from before traumatic events as an innocent, unknowing entity. The event meant a disruption in their narrative of identity, which resulted in presenting a version of self before the war, and another version of the self after the war (see also King, 2000; Lomsky-Feder, 1995; Lomsky-Feder, 2004).

The change in identity that occurs when a soldier goes on deployment, and the struggle to find new ways of identifying when returning home, is also aptly described by Iraq veteran Eric in Finley's *Fields of Combat* (2011):

I feel like I lost my identity that I had before, predeployment. Who I was before doesn't exist anymore. And I gained a new warrior identity, and I became that. And I'm almost afraid — I'm very much afraid of letting go of that. Because now that I've been removed from Iraq and I've been removed from the time that identity changed in me, I'm afraid of the pain and suffering that's going to come with changing again (Finley, 2011, pp. 144-145).

Identifying as a veteran may provide the 'new' identity this soldier is looking for, as it allows room for the military past to be integrated into the narrative and demonstrates the relevance of this past for the present.

Soldiers, narrative and public perceptions

In this section, I elaborate more on what is known about how soldiers and veterans identify. The studies mentioned here served as inspiration for this study, since they deal with the formation of identity, narrative and societal perceptions. For instance, Tomforde studied the types of self-image that German peacekeeping soldiers had who went on deployment to Bosnia in 2003–2004. The most prevalent self-image was that of 'helper in uniform', with which more than half of the soldiers identified. About a quarter saw themselves as leader and educator, and less than 10% identified as 'martial adventurer', 'careerist', or 'male warrior' (p. 584). It is important to note that the most prevalent self-image legitimises the participation of the Bundeswehr in overseas missions, a sensitive subject given its aggressive role in both World Wars. Tomforde implicitly demonstrated how this broader cultural context influenced self-image among soldiers.

The Dutch soldiers in Sion's (2006) study were clearly situated in a different national context than the soldiers in Tomforde's study. Sion studied the preparation of Dutch soldiers for a peacekeeping mission in Bosnia in 1998, and found that the training, directed at preparing soldiers for war and violence, did not meet the reality of a relative stable and quiet mission on the ground. This caused the infantry soldiers to become bitter about the mission as they had been expecting to act as a 'real army' and, instead, had had to perform 'feminine' or 'civilian' tasks such as providing health care or talking to locals. Hence, to use Tomforde's terms, the self-image of the male warrior collided with the reality of the helper in uniform. Sion particularly blamed the gap between the military's combat orientation and society's preference for peacekeeping missions for this collision. Meanwhile, artilleryists were not as frustrated, which Sion explained through their

self-image being less concerned with masculine and warrior values, because their tasks entailed less direct contact with the enemy. Hence, what Sion's study demonstrates is that the self-image of the soldiers pre-deployment versus the reality of deployment played a huge role in the level of satisfaction they felt after deployment.

In Denmark, Sørensen (2015) studied how Danish veterans constructed this self-image in their narrative when they came home from deployment — the period in which they reshaped their identification from soldier to veteran. Sørensen argued that because veterans operate in morally sensitive fields, what to tell whom, and when to tell them, are crucial when constructing a public image. She also described how the public image of their mission, portrayed by both politics and mass media, was something that veterans had to take into account when they constructed their narrative. The Danish veterans thus negotiated their identification in dialogue with the public images that existed of them, mainly those of victim or warrior. They

embraced, appropriated, reinterpreted, or replaced them reflectively and strategically in order to match their self-understandings, earn recognition, and mobilize resources (p. S239).

First, Sørensen described how Danish veterans transformed the public image of a suffering victim to that of a deserving citizen. In this narrative, the war was not blamed for the veterans' suffering; instead, veterans blamed lack of recognition from the state for their need for care after the mission. In other words, the cure for their suffering is to receive from the government and from broader society what they believe they deserve for their sacrifice: recognition and respect. Second, Sørensen described how traumatised veterans emphasised their togetherness. Instead of laying the emphasis on being traumatised, they highlighted how this trauma had strengthened their mutual bond even further. Third, the image of a wounded soldier was transformed into that of a sports hero. Through this, veterans could show that even though they were wounded, they still possessed military values such as

willpower, courage, pride, pushing oneself to the limit, never giving up, and never letting injuries or other obstacles stand in one's way. This way of disclosing and coping with past violence and current difficulties makes a claim for admiration, not pity (Sørensen 2015, p. S238).

Sørensen also saw a new narrative emerging, namely that of the 'coveted labourer' (p. S239). This pictures the soldier as a dedicated employee, identifying with their organisation and wanting to get the best out of themselves and their period of service, a narrative drawn on especially by young veterans (Sørensen, 2015). In brief, Sørensen

demonstrated how images play a role in veterans' narratives and how these images are influenced by perceptions of outsiders.

Perceptions of sameness and differences among veterans

While the studies presented in the previous section focused on self-image and narratives among active soldiers who had just returned from deployment, in this section I turn to studies focusing on veterans who left the armed forces some time ago. Even after soldiers have left the military, their identification with the institution often continues (Cooper et al., 2018; Demers, 2011; Elder & Clipp, 1988; Meyer, 2015; Smith & True, 2014; Soeters, 2018a). This can cause issues, not least because of the differences between military and civil culture, which I touched on above. Other research among Dutch veterans (Duel & Dirksen, 2016) found that the veterans had difficulties finding their place in Dutch society after leaving the armed forces particularly because of cultural differences. They missed the camaraderie, the 'can-do' mentality, and the physical challenges. They felt that civilians were more selfish and less understanding, and they missed the feeling of belonging somewhere (Duel & Dirksen, 2016). In countries including the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom, similar findings have been observed, with servicemen sometimes even experiencing a 'culture shock' or identity crisis as they transitioned back into society (Binks & Cambridge, 2018; Cooper et al., 2017; Douds & Ahlin, 2019; Hale, 2008; R. T. Smith & True, 2014; Truusa & Castro, 2019).

While veterans feel misunderstood by society (see, e.g. Douds & Ahlin, 2019; MacLeish, 2021; McCartney, 2011; Schok, Kleber, & Boeije, 2010), they feel that fellow veterans do understand them. For example, Gade & Wilkins (2013) found, in their study among veterans in the United States who received care from Veterans Affairs, that veterans 'feel they receive higher quality assistance and are more satisfied with the program when they know or believe their counsellor is also a veteran' (p. 269). In other words, a relationship of trust was more easily built with another veteran: a veteran caregiver would understand them whereas a civilian would not (Gade & Wilkins, 2013). The same sentiment has been found among Dutch soldiers in military service (Bogaers et al., 2020). This feeling of mutual understanding is also what brings Dutch veterans to reunions, as Mouthaan et al. (2005) showed in their study on social bonding among Dutch veterans. The veterans they studied emphasised that, when sharing memories, it was important for them to get something back from the other person, in order to confirm similarities. Respondents said their perceptions of sameness was affirmed by the sharing of memories. This study also showed that Dutchbat III (Srebrenica) veterans participated more often in reunions than Lebanon veterans or veterans who were deployed to other areas in Bosnia. Reasons for this are not mentioned, but it could be that the greater impression events make during a mission, the greater the ensuing feeling of commonality; or, the more criticised by outsiders, as is the case with Dutchbat III, the more veterans feel connected to one other,

because the feeling of 'us versus them' is underlined when being criticised. The study points to the first explanation — although this is not made explicit — as it demonstrated that the more impression a soldier's memories of deployment made on them, either positively or negatively, the more bonding they said they felt with their buddies.

Regarding the second explanation, a publication on veterans in motorcycling clubs reported that the less understood by society veterans feel, the more they tend to feel a mutual connection with other veterans (Moelker & Schut, 2010). The same is more or less true for the Vietnam veterans in a study by Michalowski and Dubisch (2001), who come together annually to tour across the United States on their motorcycles, not only to remember their buddies who never returned home, but also to raise awareness among the public not to judge them as participants in a controversial war: they make a plea that society recognises them as human beings who have suffered because of the Vietnam war. Here, it becomes visible how Barth's interaction at the boundary and Goffman's presentation of self are relevant in the veteran world, in the way that veterans present themselves to the public, with the goal of obtaining a particular reaction. It also demonstrates that what it means to be a veteran depends not only on the veterans' internal perspectives, but also on the sentiments of others, such as relatives, the community, and the wider public.

Certainly, feelings of mutual understanding among veterans, and a lack of being understood by civilians, is prominent in the findings of several studies. In Braithwaite's (1997) research on US Vietnam veterans, the sense of being misunderstood by society was something for veterans to bond over, and was a crucial element in conversations veterans had when identifying themselves as a 'real veteran'. Here, using a particular discourse served not only to identify who was a true veteran, but also who was not, as the ones not able to prove themselves as 'real' veterans in conversations, were isolated (Braithwaite, 1997). More recently, Strom et al. (2012) and Feinstein (2015) followed the same line of argument when showing that veterans have their own subculture, expressed through, for instance, using specific military expressions when communicating. As Soeters observed:

Veterans behave, think, enjoy, suffer from and reflect on military life, long after they have quit the force (2018a, p. 25).

To summarise, what makes studying identification processes among veterans and the role of the perceived views of others interesting is, first, the fact that veterans are externally identified, labelled as veterans by powerful actors such as politicians — and that this label is formalised through law. However, what it means to identify with this label depends upon the agency of the veterans themselves. Second, identifying as a veteran is a process of making sense of the present through the past. As the prerequisite

to becoming a veteran — military deployment — lies in the past, giving meaning to identification as a veteran in the present cannot exist without narrating a version of past experiences. Third, these deployment experiences occurred within an occupational subculture, the military, which has a great influence on the identification process of its members. Fourth, the deployment itself can be viewed as an impressive event — in that it makes a memorable impression on the veteran — and as such influences and shapes identification and narrative. Fifth, expectations, military roles, and public perceptions during and after a mission may influence a veteran's self-image, and, finally, studies suggest that the military past continues to influence perceptions of sameness and difference long after veterans have left the armed forces.

1.3 METHODOLOGY

In this study, I compared different veteran groups in order to examine the interrelation between societal views and veterans' identification processes. I begin this section with an overview of the three missions on which I focused, and then provide an explanation of how I came into contact with the veterans who became my respondents, and the ensuing interview process. Lastly, I describe the methods I used to analyse the data.

Research population

I selected the following three missions to demarcate my research population: Dutchbatt in Lebanon, 1979–1983, a Dutch contribution to UNIFIL; Dutchbat I, II, III in Srebrenica, 1994–1995, a Dutch contribution to United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR); and Task Force Uruzgan (TFU) in Afghanistan, 2006–2010, under the umbrella of International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). I chose these because each mission took place in a different 'life phase' of the military organisation, and each received different types of reactions in the media and wider society, as I briefly explain here and elaborate on more fully in the next chapter. Selecting these three groups thus enabled broader insights into what influences veterans' identification process, as well as in the role the perceived views in society played in this process.

First, I turn to how the missions were debated in the media. Dutchbatt, in Lebanon, was not extensively covered. Although there was some public debate at the beginning of the mission, it did not attract much media attention — especially in comparison to the other two missions. Nowadays, there is no discussion about whether or not the mission was justified, nor on how the military performed during the mission. The veterans of Dutchbat I, II and especially III in Srebrenica, on the other hand, have received severe criticism in the media regarding their military performance. While political parties agreed at the time of deployment that this mission was justified, the mission became

more controversial after the fall of Srebrenica in 1995. The political decision making at the level of the Dutch government and the United Nations has come under scrutiny, as has the military performance, and both are still the subject of public debate and reflections (see, e.g. Brouwers, 2021b; Flevoland, 2015; Keultjes, 2021; NOS Nieuws, 2015; PAX, 2020). This debate is mainly focused on the performance of Dutchbat III, yet veterans of Dutchbat I and II often feel that the criticisms are directed at them as well (see also Driessen, 2021; Molendijk, 2020). Although Task Force Uruzgan (TFU), the most recent deployment that veterans in this study took part in, is also still being debated in the media today, the debate takes a different form to that on Srebrenica. TFU was politically controversial at the time: indeed, the cabinet fell because of its decision to stay in Uruzgan (Klep, 2011). Public debate on what the point of the mission was, and whether it was justified, still continues today (see, e.g. NOS nieuws, 2020; Van der Kaaij, 2016; Wagendorp, 2020). Hence, Task Force Uruzgan received widespread media attention, and whether or not the mission was justified has been questioned. When I began this study in 2016, the military's performance had received little criticism and evaluations by both Ministry of Defence as well as the media had been mainly positive (Klep, 2011).¹² Dozens of decorations for bravery have been awarded. These differences in media attention and controversy may lead to different perceptions of views of others for the veterans involved, and therefore may influence identification for the veterans involved, which makes a comparison valuable for gaining insight in this process.

That these groups are of specific interest is also evident because of the studies that have been devoted to them. In 2005, the Veterans Institute conducted a study specifically directed at the well-being, needs and desires of Lebanon veterans (Mouthaan et al., 2005). In 2019, a general survey on well-being and quality of life was sent out to veterans (Reijnen & Duel, 2019), and one research team specifically focused on veterans that were deployed to Afghanistan, in order to compare their results with the overall veteran population (Wester & Snel, 2019). Dutchbat III was left out of this survey, since a different large study on their well-being and needs was conducted simultaneously (Olff et al., 2020). I return to the results of these studies in the next chapter, where I describe the background of the conflicts, the mission areas and highlights, and the aftermath of the missions.

These three missions also marked a change in Defence policy. UNIFIL was the first peacekeeping mission in which the Netherlands had participated significantly in a long

12 However, at the time of writing, ex-soldiers have sought media attention to come clean about the reality of the mission, confessing to have 'sewn terror in Uruzgan' (Broere, 2020) or to have 'overstepped the mark' (Van der Ziel, 2020), referring to the suffering and even casualties among Afghan civilians. This bears similarities with 1968, when an East Indies veteran was the first to open up about abuses and violations of human rights during the war of independence in the Dutch East Indies (Ruyter, 1968). Also, in 2021, the court case against the state started, concerning the Battle of Chora, which resulted in deaths among the Afghan civilian population. Further, the Taliban take-over of the Afghan government has put the debate around TFU in a new light.

while and provided many lessons regarding care for both materials and personnel. The contribution to Srebrenica marked a change in thinking about participating in these peacekeeping missions, as the Netherlands felt naïve, in retrospect, and let down by other countries. As a result the Netherlands became much more aware of the terms of condition before deciding whether or not to join an international mission. Also, the aftercare for veterans was further professionalized based on the experiences with Srebrenica veterans. Lastly, the contribution to the mission in Afghanistan named ISAF, and especially Task Force Uruzgan (TFU), changed the image of the Netherlands soldiers as incapable, clumsy warriors — an image which the debacle of Srebrenica had affirmed. Instead, the Netherlands demonstrated its fighting capability and that it was a country of international importance. Hence, all three missions had a specific place in the history of the Dutch participation in international missions and in the development of the Netherlands military self-image (Klep, 2019d).

Recruitment of informants

In total, I interviewed forty-seven veterans, fifteen from TFU, and sixteen from both Dutchbatt in Lebanon and Dutchbat in Srebrenica. All participants had left the armed forces when I interviewed them. Most of the veterans who participated in Dutchbatt in Lebanon or TFU were contacted via the annual questionnaire 'Core Data Veterans' (*Kerngegevens Veteranen*) that the Veterans Institute sent out in 2014–2018. In this questionnaire, participants could leave their e-mail address if they were willing to be interviewed. Most of my informants were recruited via this questionnaire, although a few I interviewed after meeting them at veteran gatherings or after being introduced by mutual acquaintances.

The veterans of Dutchbat in Srebrenica could not be recruited through this questionnaire as it did not specifically ask whether they had served in Srebrenica or somewhere else in Former Yugoslavia during the first half of 1990s. Therefore, I approached the veterans who participated in the Interview Collection of Netherlands Veterans Institute to ask if they were willing to be interviewed for my study. Also, I used a snowball sampling method by asking veterans I interviewed whether they knew other veterans who served in Dutchbat in Srebrenica who would be willing to contribute to my study. Some put this question off in their digital networks, which received response.

The interviews were conducted between November 2016 and March 2018. The ages of the veterans ranged from 26–70 years old. Twenty-seven had the rank of corporal when they left service. Ten were non-commissioned officers (NCOs), and ten were officers by the time they left the service. All departments of the military (navy, army, air force and military police) are represented in the interviews conducted for this study. However, since selection was based on deployment, numbers are not equally divided.

Army members are overrepresented as the army participated in all three deployments in large numbers.

Interviews

As I discussed in section 1.2, examining a life story is a useful strategy when studying identification processes, especially if the process is based on events that lie in the past, as is the case with veterans' identification. Also, the story of a veteran who has left the service knows many 'transitions, crossroads and watershed events' that, according to Brekhus (Brekhus, 2008, p. 1073) 'mark identity changes over the life course'. Therefore, the list of topics I sought to cover in the interviews included eliciting the veteran's life story, chronologically, paying particular attention to their military service and deployment as well as to their transition out of military service. Respondents told me about their youth, their expectations and motivations for joining the armed forces and going on deployment, their stories of home comings, transition back into society, and the life that unfolded afterwards.

I asked them to tell me a positive and negative memory of the deployment. We also spoke about the performance of and atmosphere in their unit, contact with family at home during deployment, and whether they would choose to go on deployment again, given everything they now knew. The deployment's place in the overall narrative became clearer once we talked about the influence of the deployment on their future life, whether or not the mission had made a difference, how often they thought back to their deployment, what they had learned from their deployment, how/if it had changed their world view, and if they would do it again.

We then switched to the present time, and they told me about how they viewed themselves, what they valued most in their life, the kind of characteristics they most identified with themselves, where they felt most at home, and whether or not they perceived changes in this compared to the time before deployment. Of course, I asked them what it meant for them to be a veteran, how active they were in expressing being a veteran, and how they thought veterans differed from civilians. They also told me how they saw themselves relating to other veterans in general and veterans from their own and the two other missions that are subject of this study in particular. Since identification processes are influenced by the opinions of others, the last topic on my list, often already covered when discussing the preceding topics, was the perceived reactions from acquaintances, and from the media and society in general on their mission, on veterans of their own mission and on veterans in general.

The interview always ended with a question about the informant's motivation in agreeing to be interviewed, and a question about whether the informant gave their consent to be cited in this dissertation and, if yes, whether I could use their real name or if they would prefer a pseudonym. Only two respondents chose the latter option, and

one preferred not to be cited. However, due to the updated privacy legislation of 2019 in the Netherlands, I gave all my respondents a pseudonym, except for those whose stories I present in such detail that it would be easily traceable back to them, regardless of whether or not their name was changed. I asked these four respondents for written permission to cite them in this thesis, which they gave me.

As I argued earlier, the context in which a story is told matters. For this reason, I asked the veterans to choose the location of the interview themselves. Most chose their own homes, some preferred the Veterans Institute and a few wanted to meet in a public place. I gave the veterans the chance to speak freely about the things my questions brought to mind. The methods created a different setting to, for example, a conversation between two equal partners, as there was clearly a narrator and a listener. Many of the veterans I spoke to said that they enjoyed talking about their lives and deployment again.

What also matters when telling a story, is the type of audience. My position as a researcher of the Veterans Institute may have opened doors of veterans that would otherwise have remained shut. On the other hand, more than once it transpired that the veteran I visited had not read my email thoroughly and thought I was a researcher aligned with another institute or 'just some other psychology student'. It is also possible that veterans did not tell me everything precisely because of my employer. They may have withheld criticisms on veteran policy, the Veterans Institute, or the way financial compensation is awarded. However, some did express these criticisms while telling me that it was 'nothing personal'. During the interviews, I tried to speak as much as possible on my own behalf as a researcher, rather than as a representative of the implementer of veteran policy.

Analysis

The interviews were recorded with permission of the informant and later transcribed. The data were coded in the program Atlas Ti. Writing, theory formation and coding unfolded simultaneously, one process continuously feeding the other.

I started with open coding, by creating codes closely related to the actual quotation. For example, when veterans spoke of others questioning them about whether they had killed anyone as soon as they found out they had been on deployment, I coded 'killed anyone?', or when they talked about other veterans having psychological difficulties, I coded that part with 'psychological issues co-veterans'. This helped me to organise my thoughts on what came to the fore in the interviews and the ways in which this related to the literature. For example, through examining new literature on dirty work (see Chapter Four), I put the code 'killed anyone?' under the theme 'voyeuristic scrutiny (dirty work)', and, based on literature about veterans images of themselves, I created codes of images of 'the veteran' that came to the fore, such as the 'injured veteran' under which the code 'psychological issues of co-veterans' belonged. Hence, during the coding I developed

new codes, which also made it necessary to clean up the code system occasionally, to merge codes, and to add new codes.

During the coding process, I wrote memos about my thoughts and ideas for literature, as they occurred to me. Through my employment at the Veterans Institute, I also had informal talks with veterans, and I attended events such as the Veterans Day in The Hague, speed dating events with veterans at the Liberation Festivals on the May 5th, and several veteran gatherings in which I not only engaged in informal talks with veterans, but also observed the rituals and behaviour that characterised these kinds of events. These talks and observations I wrote down and kept in mind when thinking about how to interpret the interview material.

When all interviews had been coded, I had clear insights into the themes that played a major role in identification processes among veterans. I divided these themes into three overarching topics: what is a veteran and how does the informant relate to his or her idea of a veteran; how do others view the military, veterans and their mission; how do veterans present themselves to others. For example, the code 'killed anyone?', placed under the theme of 'voyeuristic scrutiny (dirty work)', came under the super code of how others view veterans. The code 'psychological issues co-veterans', under the theme of 'injured veteran' I placed under the super code of 'veteran images'. So, initially, I used an emic approach during the coding, in which the codes resembled the words of the veteran whom I had interviewed. Subsequently, I used an etic approach in which I interpreted what was said with the help of the literature.

During the analysis, as well as during the writing process, I discussed my findings with colleagues at the Veterans Institute. Their experience with studying veterans and the military helped me to clarify some things, as it enabled me to contextualise my findings in a broader perspective. Also, because they have backgrounds in different disciplines, these colleagues could provide me with historical context or a psychological perspective on my findings. I also consulted academic colleagues working with veterans or militaries in active service in other organisations on how they would interpret my findings or what they thought about my analysis. I presented my work in progress in two symposia of the biannual European Research Group on Military and Society (ERGOMAS), where I had the opportunity to compare my findings with anthropologists and sociologists working on similar themes in other countries. Their reactions to my presentations, as well as the content of their work, inspired me to continue my thematic analysis. At the end of the writing phase, I also consulted colleagues working directly with veterans in more practical projects, such as the Veterans in the Class Room programme, about what they thought of my conclusions and their practical implications.

1.4 OUTLINE OF THE THESIS

The veterans I interviewed for this study were deployed to Lebanon as part of UNIFIL, to Srebrenica as part of UNPROFOR, and to Uruzgan as part of ISAF. The next chapter will elaborate on these missions, by describing what they entailed and outlining the contextual similarities and differences. I highlight the major events that occurred during the mission, as well as public opinion during the mission, the end of the Dutch contribution to these missions and what happened afterwards — both in terms of media coverage and political attention, as well as the results of studies concerning veterans who took part in this particular mission.

In the three chapters that follow, I present my data and put these in a broader perspective supported by the literature. In each chapter, I present findings regarding a particular topic for each veteran group. I start with what came to the fore in the interviews with Lebanon veterans, Srebrenica veterans, and Uruzgan veterans. In the last section, I highlight and explain the similarities and differences I found between these three groups.

The first of these three ethnographic chapters is the third chapter of this thesis; it concerns the images of ‘the veteran’ — a characteristic portrayal of what or who a veteran is — that featured in the veterans’ narratives. Each section concerns veterans of one of the three missions and starts with an in-depth portrait of one of the veterans in this group. For me, these three stories demonstrate typical characteristics of the stories told by the rest of the veterans in this group. Following this portrait, I set out the narrative elements that construct the distinguished veteran images and the consequences these representations have for the narrator’s identification as a veteran. The chapter ends with a comparative analysis of the findings in each of the three veteran groups.

The fourth chapter is concerned with how veterans experienced being externally identified by actors such as the media, politicians, and wider society. It reflects on how veterans perceived the societal views on the military and its veterans in general, and also focuses on reactions regarding their mission in particular. The chapter outlines the role societal actors, such as the media and politics, play in creating this public image, according to the veterans themselves. I also describe how the attitudes of civilians, as perceived by the veterans, influence the ways in which veterans act. The chapter ends with a comparative analysis of these themes.

In the fifth chapter, I examine the way veterans presented themselves to the outside world, as well as why some veterans chose not to present themselves as a veteran. First, I describe the ways in which they presented themselves in different staged settings, together with reactions they desired from their audience. This is followed by what veterans thought of other veterans’ performances and how they reacted to that. The chapter

ends with a comparative analysis, in which the findings are explained through a more theoretical lens.

In the sixth chapter, I summarise my findings by drawing the three preceding chapters together. I outline the similarities and differences in identifying as a veteran that I found between the three groups, and contextualise these within the literature. In the seventh and last chapter, I discuss my findings in relation to veteran policy making, in particular the two pillars of providing care for veterans and stimulating recognition and appreciation for veterans. I also wonder whether the veteran status is helping veterans, or is keeping them in a forever in-between position: neither civilian, nor soldier.





2

Three (of many) ways to become a Dutch veteran: Missions in Lebanon, Srebrenica, and Uruzgan

This chapter describes the background of the Dutch military contribution in Lebanon, Srebrenica, and Uruzgan and thereby provides the necessary contextual information to understand the ethnographic chapters that follow. As described in the previous chapter, identification as a veteran is about making sense of the past in the present. To understand how veterans identify in the present, it is therefore essential to be aware of what happened in the past. The chapter thus focuses on Dutch deployment in these countries, taking into account the general mindset in the Netherlands regarding international affairs at the time, public opinion during the missions, the organisation of the military, the nature of the conflicts, the reality on the ground for each mission, and how the missions ended. All these factors contributed to veterans' impressions and understandings of the situation they found themselves in at the time of the deployment — and this, in turn, can influence the role deployment plays in their narratives, the way they perceive public opinion and, consequently, how they identify as veterans. The chapter also sheds light on what happened between the end of the mission and the time of writing, taking into account societal debate around the mission, and efforts to show recognition and appreciation for veterans of the particular mission. The chapter ends with a comparison of the most relevant differences and similarities between the societal, military, and international contexts of the three missions, and public opinion regarding the mission and its veterans.

2.1 DUTCHBATT AND DUTCHCOY IN LEBANON (1979 — 1985)

In the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, the Cold War was the focus of the Dutch military. The armed forces were preparing for the day the Warsaw Pact forces would attack. Conscripts as well as professionals were trained to defend the North German Plain against an attack from East Germany. During this period, from 1979 until 1985, the Netherlands joined the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), under the name Dutchbatt, which was replaced in 1983 by the name Dutchcoy. About 9,000 soldiers were deployed, of whom some 80%–90% were conscripts (Elands, Van Woensel, & Valk, 2019; Netherlands Veterans Institute, 2014a; Van der Werf, 2018).

The mission: Context, reality on the ground, and the end

In 1978, Israel invaded the southern part of Lebanon in response to attacks from the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) which was in South Lebanon. Lebanon protested against the Israeli occupation at the United Nations (UN), requesting intervention (Karamé, 2001; Makdisi et al., 2009; Schoenmaker & Maas, 2004d; Van Gils, 2005a). The UN asked Israel to withdraw its troops and decided, when Israel complied, to send forces

to the area to secure the withdrawal of the Israeli forces, to restore peace and security in the region, and to help re-establish the authority of the Lebanese government (Elands, Van Woensel, & Valk, 2019; Heiberg & Holst, 1986; Karamé, 2001; Makdisi et al., 2009; Van der Klaauw & Scholten, 1979).

In the 1960s, the Netherlands had offered to contribute to UN peace keeping missions, and the 44 Mechanised Infantry Battalion (44 MIB) therefore had to be on standby in case the offer was taken up. However, because of the controversial wars the Netherlands had fought with Indonesia — first over its independence and then over the territory of New Guinea — it was not until 1978 that the UN requested the Dutch to participate in UNIFIL. At that time, UNIFIL had been operational for some months, and it had become clear that the mission was complicated and could require human sacrifices. The high commanders in the Dutch army were not very enthusiastic about the idea of participating in UNIFIL. As the Cold War was still ongoing and the armed forces were focused on self-defence towards the Warsaw Pact, the conflict in Lebanon seemed less relevant for the Netherlands than the military threat coming from Eastern Europe. The commanders feared that its participation in UNIFIL would diminish their capacity to join NATO-forces if required. Furthermore, UN training had largely been neglected: soldiers of the 44 MIB had received a symbolic UN blue cord, which they could wear on their uniforms, but the planned education on peacekeeping, humanitarian rights, or the organisation of the UN was barely given (Klep, 2005c; Schoenmaker & Maas, 2004a, pp. 64-66; Van der Klaauw & Scholten, 1979).

Despite this, because of the 1960s promise to the UN, the Dutch government saw itself as obliged to send troops, and the 44 MIB in Zuid-Laren remained the battalion selected for this task. The Dutch government committed itself to UNIFIL for a year (Van der Klaauw & Scholten, 1979): the initial plan was two rotations of 6 months, each to be sent to Lebanon. In the end, the Netherlands participated in UNIFIL for almost 6 years (Heiberg & Holst, 1986; Makdisi et al., 2009; Schoenmaker & Maas, 2004d). The government hoped that joining UNIFIL would strengthen the Netherlands position in world politics (Schoenmaker & Maas, 2004a, pp. 79-80).

The press reacted with severe criticism on the announcement to join UNIFIL, not least because the majority of the conscripts who were about to be deployed were very young and lacked experience. At the time, military service was still mandatory for the two eldest sons of a family, and 75% of the 44 MIB were conscripts who had signed a form declaring that they were aware of the possibility of being deployed on a UN mission. Most had thought it would never happen (Schoenmaker & Maas, 2004b, pp. 91-92) (see also the quotation in the text box from one of my informants). Therefore, sending conscripts to Lebanon was highly controversial. The complicated situation in Lebanon and the widespread reputation of the peacekeeping force as being powerless also fostered concern. Parents of the soon to be deployed soldiers united themselves to fight the decision.

Military unions shared their concern. However, the first rotation of 150 conscripts were forced to go to Lebanon based on the fact that they had signed the afore mentioned form. Two platoons from the 43 MIB also joined the mission as the deployable strength of the 44 MIB alone was not sufficient. The only preparation the soldiers received for the mission was a quickly launched training programme of 2 weeks. The concerned parents and military unions did influence the recruiting during the rest of the mission: after the first rotation, the training programme improved and only volunteers were deployed. These volunteers were recruited by advertisements at the military bases and through promotional videos (Schoenmaker & Maas, 2004b, 2004c).

'As location for my conscription, I picked Zuid-Laren. I had to see a lieutenant who said: 'You know that UN troops are stationed there right?' But he mentioned in the same sentence that the last time they were deployed was to Sudan in 1963, and that that deployment consisted of two lorries. In other words: don't worry too much. A week later, I was told I was going to Lebanon.'

Dutchbatt, as the Dutch battalion in Lebanon was named, was stationed in a sector that ran from the coast to 15 km inland. The area was 8 km at its widest point. In this area, 32,000 inhabitants resided in 22 villages. Dutchbatt comprised four companies: one staff; one combat support; and two armoured infantry, each responsible for an area within the Dutchbatt zone. It was tasked with manning observation posts at night to keep an eye on the area and, during the day, with conducting walking patrols among the local population. It also manned UNIFIL roadblocks, which had been set up to discourage infiltration by the warring parties in the area. UNIFIL was a 'blue helmet' mission which meant that the soldiers were neutral and had to keep warring parties apart and disarm them (Van Gils, 2005a, p. 81).

Although all eight battalions of UNIFIL, each from a different nation, were working under the UN flag and had the same mandate, each was responsible for a specific area, and the way each nation interpreted and implemented their mandate differed (Karamé, 2001; Roozenbeek, 2004b, 2004c, 2004d). Dutchbatt reacted more aggressively than others to provocations. For example, in retaliation to shots fired at them, Dutchbatt shot as many times as the offending party had, although these were often warning shots in the air (Roozenbeek, 2004a, 2004b, 2004c, 2004d). During the mission, the Dutch government asked for a stronger mandate for UNIFIL, as Dutchbatt felt unable to keep peace or control any of the warring parties. However, the UN feared that a stronger mandate would cause a 'spiral of violence'. Also, most troops of the other countries involved had less severe weaponry than Dutchbatt, which made it debatable whether a stronger mandate was realistic (Elands et al., 2019; Roozenbeek, 2004b; 2004d, pp. 248-253; 2004e).

The mission took its toll as nine Dutch soldiers died (Elands, Van Woensel, & Valk, 2019; Van Gils, 2005a). One conscripted sergeant died in November 1979 when a lorry hit a bomb that had been planted on a road used mainly by UNIFIL. This attack was

perceived as being directly against UNIFIL. The offenders were never caught. The other Dutch fatalities were caused by disease, traffic accidents, and shooting accidents.¹³ A number of soldiers and commanders were severely wounded by road bombs or shootings (Van der Beek, Van Onzenoort, & Verkuyll, 1987). Between 1979 and 1985 Dutch soldiers were also disarmed and held hostage in ambushes by either the De Facto Forces (DFF) or the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO.) Some Dutch soldiers were engaged in two other serious confrontations with the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) and its ally, the DFF, in 1979 and 1980 (Roozenbeek, 2004b, pp. 184-193; 220-230). Sometimes posts were shot at, either to threaten Dutchbatt soldiers or to provoke an actual firefight (Klep, 2005b; Roozenbeek, 2004b, 2004c, 2004d). Nevertheless, actual firefights were incidental, since their mandate did not allow UN soldiers to engage in firefights, unless their lives were in danger (Van der Klaauw & Scholten, 1979).

When Israel invaded Lebanon a second time, on June 6, 1982, it was clearer than ever that UNIFIL was largely powerless. However, the mission did not wind up quickly, as the international community feared this would only increase chaos in Lebanon, and the UN did not want to 'reward' Israel for its aggressiveness by withdrawing and leaving the local population to its fate (Klep, Schoenmaker, & Maas, 2004b; Van Gils, 2005a). This second invasion did, however, reinvigorate the political debate in the Netherlands about when to withdraw from Lebanon. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs wanted the troops to stay, and had to convince the Ministry of Defence to agree. In 1983, the situation for the local people in Lebanon further deteriorated and the Ministry of Defence supported an extension of the mission. Dutch forces were reduced to just one company, Dutchcoy, which had the same tasks as Dutchbatt but operated on a much smaller scale. From a force of 900 soldiers, 155 remained (Elands, Van Woensel, & Valk, 2019; Klep, Schoenmaker, & Maas, 2004a; Van Gils, 2005a). This mission was extended three times and, in October 1985, the Dutch government informed the UN that the Netherlands was withdrawing (Van den Broek & De Ruiter, 1985). On October 17, 1985, Dutchcoy handed over its duties to Nepal and Fiji, UNIFIL partners (Elands, Van Woensel, & Valk, 2019; Klep, Schoenmaker, & Maas, 2004a).

Public opinion during the mission

Aside from the initial public reaction when it became clear that some conscripts were being forced to go to Lebanon, UNIFIL did not attract much public attention. It was neither heavily criticised nor praised. At the time, public attention focused more on the Cold War and the nuclear arms race, although the media did show some interest in the daily lives of the soldiers. On the whole, there was much scepticism, particularly regarding the usefulness of the mission and the complex situation on the ground. However,

13 Guns of fellow soldiers that accidentally went off

the actual Dutchbatt and Dutchcoy operations received mainly positive comments, and the mission proved that the Dutch Army was able to function professionally in war circumstances abroad (Schoenmaker, 2004; Schoenmaker & Maas, 2004a).



Roadblock of Dutchbatt in Lebanon (Netherlands Institute of Military History (NIMH), 2021b)

A subject that received a little more media attention was the wadi al-Ayn-incident in 1980, when Israeli soldiers killed four PLO-fighters. Dutchbatt soldiers witnessed Israeli soldiers blowing up the corpses. The Israelis later stated that the bodies had been boobytrapped by suicide belts, which they had decided to explode, in order to prevent these to make casualties. This news was covered by both the Dutch and the Israeli press and painted Israeli forces in a questionable light, although Dutch public opinion mostly sympathised with the Israelis. A UN report concluded that none of the parties was at fault. However, in August 1981, the incident flared up again in the Dutch media when an article was published illustrated with photos of the bodies taken by a Dutchbatt soldier. The Israeli ambassador protested and the Dutch government announced that it was time to 'let the case rest' (Roozenbeek, 2004c, pp. 225-235). There was also public criticism of Dutchbatt personnel regarding the behaviour of Israeli soldiers, especially after the Israeli invasion of 1982. This received media attention as the criticism undermined the Netherlands self-image of being a loyal ally to Israel.

Aftermath

Recognition and appreciation

In addition to the recognition given to Dutch veterans after deployment in general — which was largely through awarding commemorative medals — the Ministry of Defence also made a gesture of recognition and appreciation towards veterans of the UNIFIL mission in particular. In 2015, the Dutch Ministry of Defence arranged for Dutch veterans who had been deployed on a UN mission during this period to receive a Nobel Prize insignia. In 1988, the UN peace forces that had been deployed between 1956 and 1988 were awarded the Nobel Prize for peace. Although the time between the UN edict and the making of the Nobel Prize insignia is remarkable, most Lebanon veterans were motivated to request this insignia. An estimated 8,000 Dutch Lebanon veterans have received it, either during a ceremony at the army base in Havelte, the 44 MIB base, or in a city hall, or by mail.

Lebanon veterans have also been in the public eye because of their call for greater recognition, mainly directed at the Ministry of Defence. These calls claim that the Ministry has been negligent in its duty of providing care for veterans. In the first court case concerning this claim, the court ruled that the litigating veteran had the right to receive compensation for the costs caused by the health problems — and as a result of these health problems, financial issues — he experienced after deployment. After this ruling, other veterans came forward to demand compensation which was covered in newspaper articles (Van Joolen, 2016; Van Outeren, 2016; Visser, 2015; Voermans, 2016).

Concerning public recognition for the mission in Lebanon, a survey conducted by Bot and Konings (2019), focused on establishing levels of recognition and appreciation of veterans among the general public in the Netherlands, found that 37% of respondents thought the mission to Lebanon was justified, while 12% did not. The remaining 51% had no opinion on this matter. Furthermore, 51% of respondents said they were very appreciative of the veterans of this mission, while 8% said they were not. 41% did not feel strongly one way or another. Hence, although society did not feel extremely enthusiastic towards Lebanon veterans and their mission, it was also not particularly negatively.

Studies on veterans

In 2005, a study by Mouthaan et al. on the mental health of Lebanon veterans found that some 15% reported severe mental health issues — a significantly higher percentage than Dutch non-veteran males of the same age. Lebanon veterans who had been deployed at a young age and had since left the armed forces also reported a lower quality of life than their non-veteran counterparts. However, older Lebanon veterans and those who were still in active duty perceived the quality of their life to be slightly higher than the average Dutch male of the same age. One in five said they had needed medical

interventions as a result of their deployment. Veterans with mental health issues were more likely to possess a veterans card and to be a member of veterans associations than those who did not suffer from mental health problems. The Mouthaan et al. study also mentioned some positive effects of deployment on the lives of veterans: it broadened their horizons, it turned them into adults, and for many it helped them to find meaning in life. Three out of four respondents said that they felt proud of their deployment.

About a decade later, in the years 2014–2018, the Veterans Institute sent out an annual survey known as *Core Data Veterans* (see Chapter One) (Duel, Dirksen, & Reijnen, 2021). A secondary analysis of the data gathered during these years showed that 73% of Lebanon veterans said they ‘feel like a veteran’. Slightly fewer, 63%, said they felt connected to other veterans. Some 33% expressed their veteran status publicly, and 81% said they were proud to be a veteran. Compared to the figures of the general veteran population, as presented in section 1.1, these percentages are higher, but show the same tendency: a large majority feels proud to be a veteran, but a minority presents themselves as such. Also, veterans who feel a connection with other veterans are outnumbered by 10% compared to the ones feeling like a veteran. Further, 45% felt appreciated by media coverage, while 37% felt appreciated by the general public. Just over 50% felt appreciated by the state and the Ministry of Defence, and some 50% also said they felt appreciated by family and friends. Here we see that, the sense of being appreciated by society is the lowest, and just as among the general veteran population this is followed by media coverage, the state and acquaintances.

Media

A large study on newspaper articles about veterans showed that, in the period August 2017—July 2018, of 527 articles that explicitly mentioned a military mission in which the Dutch armed forces had participated, only 10 mentioned the mission in Lebanon (Cozzi, Dirksen, & Van Der Werf, 2018, p. 12). This underscores how only a few decades after the end of the mission there is little media attention on the UNIFIL mission or its veterans. Now and then interest has been rekindled in the Lebanon mission due to events such as the explosion in Beirut in 2020 (Hart van Nederland, 2020; see, e.g. Van Dillen, 2020); awards of damages by the Court (see, e.g. Dekker, 2016; Van Beers, 2017); or the award of the Nobel Prize insignia (Scholten, 2018; see, e.g. Vos, 2015). The annual Veterans Day also prompts the media to publish stories about Lebanon veterans (see, e.g. Salm, 2018; Ubert, 2018). Also, Dutch UNIFIL veterans have been mentioned regularly in articles and documentaries about Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) among veterans (see, e.g. Akkermans, 2018; Mulder, 2018; Salm, 2018; Van Elten, 2018; Vos, 2015).

To summarise, the situation in Lebanon had been complex. As it transpired, the mission’s goal was too ambitious for a ‘blue helmet’ mission. While the deployment had a formative influence on many of the veterans — and left its mark on many others — it

did not leave a lasting impression on the general public. At the time of the mission, the media — and, indeed the armed forces themselves — were more concerned with issues regarding the Cold War. In contemporary Netherlands, there is little strong public opinion regarding the mission and its veterans, and media attention is relatively scant. However, in national military history, the mission has a special position, as it is often seen as the starting point of Dutch involvement in international peacekeeping missions.¹⁴

2.2 DUTCHBAT IN SREBRENICA (1994 — 1995)

In the period between the deployments to Lebanon and Srebrenica, the Berlin Wall fell, which symbolised the end of the Cold War. The armed forces had thus been preparing for a war that would not take place after all. The military was therefore scaled back, and had to find a new purpose. The Minister of Defence saw this new purpose as joining international peace missions. In order to be able to respond quickly to future UN requests, the Airmobile Brigade was established, which comprised highly trained combat professionals (Ministry of Defence, 2021d). Those who joined the Airmobile Brigade had to complete a tough training course, and those who succeeded were presented with the prestigious red beret. The first berets were awarded in 1992, and the UN mission known as the United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR), to former Yugoslavia, was the first mission in which the 'red berets' participated.

From 1992 to 1995 the Netherlands took part in the UNPROFOR mission, contributing some 10,000 soldiers. My research focuses on approximately 2,300 veterans who were deployed to Srebrenica in 1994 and 1995 as part of that mission. I decided to focus on this group because of the public controversy that developed following its catastrophic end.

The mission: Context, reality on the ground, and the fall of Srebrenica

The end of the Cold War did not mean the end of unrest in Europe. Indeed, the end of communist rule in Eastern Europe tipped the ethnically divided Republic of Yugoslavia into civil war. In 1992, UNPROFOR was deployed to deescalate the civil war and help create a situation that would make a peaceful solution possible. The UN peace keeping mission relied on three principles: permission from all parties involved in the conflict for the UN to be present; impartiality on the UN's side; and the use of force by UN troops only as a last resort if they were in physical danger (United Nations, 2008). In June 1992,

14 This perception is, however, incorrect: the Netherlands had already taken part in peacekeeping missions in the 1950s and 1960s, although on a much smaller scale.

the UNPROFOR area was extended from Croatia to Bosnia, where the mission initially focused on providing humanitarian aid.

At the start of 1993, Bosnian Serbs attacked Muslim areas in the eastern part of Bosnia. Srebrenica had a Muslim majority surrounded by areas dominated by Bosnian Serbs. In order to protect the area against Bosnian Serb attacks, the UN Security Council declared Srebrenica a Safe Area in April 1993 (Elands, Van Woensel, & Valk 2019; United Nations, 1993). In May, five other areas followed: Sarajevo, Tuzla, Žepa, Gorazde, and Bihać. These territories were under the protection of UNPROFOR and had to be defended in case of attack of the militant forces. In order to safeguard these areas, the UN Secretary General called for a force of 34,000 soldiers. However, only some 4,000 soldiers were deployed as few countries were willing to send troops to these dangerous areas. The troops had the mandate to defend the Safe Areas by use of force if they were attacked. However, they were lightly armed compared to the surrounding Bosnian Serb militants. The only way to defend the Safe Areas effectively was therefore through air strikes (Elands et al., 2019; Klep & Winslow, 1999; Van Gils, 2005b).

The Netherlands, along with several other European countries, had been advocating UN intervention since the outbreak of the civil war in former Yugoslavia (Klep & Winslow, 1999; Wieten, 2002). In September 1993, the Ministry of Defence offered the UN a battalion of the Airmobile Brigade to serve under UNPROFOR for 18 months. Both the army and the minister agreed that it would be best if the Dutch troops were placed in central Bosnia instead of in the Safe Areas of Srebrenica or Žepa, as it would be a less isolated position. However, the Dutch government eventually agreed that the battalion would be deployed to Srebrenica, at the request of the commander of the BH-Command, the central command of UNPROFOR. The Minister of Defence felt he could not refuse this request, since the parliament, media, and public opinion were united in calling for something to be done about the inhumane situation in Bosnia. Also, he feared damage to the international image of the Netherlands should he refuse, and he hoped that the example of the Netherlands would cause other countries to follow, which ultimately was not the case (Klep & Winslow, 1999, p. 99). The battalion was named Dutchbat and had four rotations.¹⁵ In contrast to the conscripts deployed in Lebanon, these rotations were almost completely comprised of professional soldiers.

Dutchbat was tasked with maintaining the security of the enclave and patrolling its borders. It did so by collecting and storing weapons from the Muslim forces in the enclave, by manning observation posts along the borders, and by patrolling daily. The soldiers maintained friendly contact with the local population by conducting patrols (Van Gils, 2005b, p. 311). In July 1994, Dutchbat II relieved Dutchbat I. By then, diesel

15 The fourth rotation, Dutchbat IV, was deployed in other areas of Bosnia as its deployment started after the fall of Srebrenica.

and food supplies were low, as Bosnian Serb soldiers often denied Support Command convoys access to Srebrenica because of political and war developments in other areas of former Yugoslavia. This meant that food, diesel and weaponry did not always arrive at the Dutchbat compound (NIOD, 2002; Van der Meulen & Soeters, 2005). Meanwhile, Muslim militants who resided in Srebrenica regularly left the area at night, attacking Bosnian Serbs in their houses, and provoking them to retaliate, after which the Muslims took cover in the areas where UN soldiers were located (NIOD, 2002; Vogelaar & Kramer, 2000). In August 1994, four Dutchbat soldiers were wounded by mine incidents in Srebrenica (Van Gils, 2005b, pp. 314-315). Later that year, a group of soldiers that had gone on furlough was held in an empty shed by Bosnian Serb militants for several days, possibly as a show of Serbian strength to the UN (NIOD, 2002, p. 3774). In other words, the situation in Srebrenica hardened.

In January 1995, Dutchbat III took over. By this time, the Bosnian Serbs had become more threatening, as they were trying to control the entire area. More and more supply convoys were stopped from entering Srebrenica, leaving Dutchbat III with less and less food, fuel, and ammunition (Klep & Winslow, 1999; NIOD, 2002; Van der Meulen & Soeters, 2005). Soldiers returning from furlough were stopped from entering the Safe Area. On March 29, 1995, a Dutchbat soldier was killed when Bosnian Serbs shot at the observation post he was manning (Van Gils, 2005b, p. 314). At the end of May 1995, the Bosnian Serb militants increased the pressure by taking positions closer to the border of the area. In the beginning of June, they captured a Dutchbat observation post in the south of the Safe Area. At first, it was assumed that they were only interested in the southern part of the area, since control of that was logistically important for them. However, it soon became clear that they were going to push further and further north and try to occupy the whole of the Srebrenica area. They forced Dutch soldiers at the observation posts to surrender or to withdraw to the cities of Srebrenica and Potočari. Retreating UN soldiers met infuriated Muslims, and a Dutchbat soldier died when the YPR (Armoured Fighting Vehicle) he was in was hit by a grenade (Van Gils, 2005b, p. 315). As soldiers returning from furlough were not allowed to enter the Safe Area when they returned, in July 1995, no more than 400 Dutchbat soldiers were present in Srebrenica. Dutchbat counted on the Close Air Support from NATO, which the UN had promised in case the Safe Area was attacked. This air support came late and was insufficient to stop the Bosnian Serbs.

The 400 Dutchbat soldiers could not prevent Srebrenica falling to the Bosnian Serb militants on July 11, 1995. Most of the Muslim fighters residing in the area had fled by then, as well as a part of the local population. It is assumed that many of them fell into the hands of the Bosnian Serbs on their flight and were killed. The rest of the population, thousands of refugees, fled to the compound of Dutchbat at Potočari, located five kilometres from Srebrenica. Fearful of being discovered by Bosnian Serbs, they all hid

in a factory hall, which was not equipped for that many people. There was not enough water or food, and the toilets started to overflow as people did not dare to go outside to use the dug latrines. The stress induced labour among many of the pregnant women, who had to give birth amid the chaos and desperation. Many elderly people died (NIOD, 2002, p. 2125).

On July 12, the Bosnian Serbs reached Potočari and organised transportation for the refugees. They started to separate the Muslim women, children, and elderly from the men of able-bodied age and declared that this was in order to transport the weaker part of the population first. The refugees were relieved to go to the buses. At first, the Dutchbat troops assisted in helping people onto the buses, but after objecting to Bosnian Serbs hitting the refugees with shovels and sticks to speed up the process, they were asked to stand back (NIOD, 2002, pp. 2045-2046; Verbraak, 2020). The men who had been separated were later executed by the Bosnian Serbs out of sight and control of the Dutch troops (Brunborg, Lyngstad, & Urdal, 2003; Elands et al., 2019; NIOD, 2002). The women and children were deported to central Bosnia. Dutchbat III left the area on July 21 and returned to the Netherlands via Zagreb (Van Gils, 2005b, p. 315-316).



The Dutch observation post, Pappa, which was frequently under fire from Bosnian Serb troops (Netherlands Institute of Military History (NIMH), 2021a).

Public opinion during the mission

In contrast to the conflict in Lebanon, the conflict in former Yugoslavia over a decade later received much attention from the Dutch media even prior to 1994. The relatively close location of the conflict and the poignant images of inhumane situations are an explanation for this considerable attention. While the volume of media attention was great, the quality and impartiality of the reports were debatable (Wieten, 2002, pp. 32-33). In Dutch news programmes and papers, reporting often highlighted the view that 'something had to be done', and parallels were made between Nazis and Bosnian Serbs. The tone in the media was that intervention had been necessary and that the Netherlands was right to play a role in it for moral reasons (Klep & Winslow, 1999; Wieten, 2002). This was also reflected in the results of surveys conducted among the Dutch public, as Van der Meulen & Soeters describe (Van der Meulen & Soeters, 2005, p. 543)

Paradoxically, Srebrenica did not attract much media attention in 1994, the period in which Dutchbat I and II were stationed in the area. It is likely that this was because it was difficult for journalists to reach the area, and because the violence and unrest was more extreme in other parts of former Yugoslavia, which therefore received more media attention (Wieten, 2002, p. 75). The media nevertheless played an important role in the interpretation of events during and after the fall of Srebrenica. Notorious footage shows Dutchbat commander Karremans talking to General Mladic, the military leader of the Bosnian Serbs, and saying that 'he is only the piano player. Don't shoot the piano player.' There is also a photograph of him raising his glass with Mladic, who soon after ordered the massacre of some 8,000 Muslim men (Klep & Winslow, 1999). Furthermore, shortly after the fall of Srebrenica, Dutch journalists witnessed the arrival in Tuzla of the busses with women and children from Srebrenica. Hearing that the men were missing, they started to investigate and soon discovered that the worst might have happened to them (Wieten, 2002, pp. 86-88).

The media were also present in Zagreb when the Dutchbat III soldiers arrived. There is more notorious footage of Dutchbat soldiers drinking beer and dancing at their welcoming party in Zagreb, an image that contrasted uncomfortably with the news about the genocide. Indeed, this footage was mentioned by several of my interviewees as a decisive factor shaping Dutchbat's poor public image (see quotation in text box). The tone of the media therefore changed after the fall of Srebrenica

What people forget, is that when we were in the city of Srebrenica before the enclave fell, we got the assignment that if it would be the case, if it would come to the point that there would be air support, that we would take off our blue beret and would operate in green. That means that at that moment you choose combat. That you choose to defend the Muslims, as soon as we would receive air support. That is quite something (tears up). That stings me. That you are actually prepared for that moment to give your life for the local population, and in hindsight are portrayed like this. And that is yeah... that is really just a stab in the back.'

(Klep & Winslow, 1999; Van der Meulen & Soeters, 2005, pp. 544-545; Wieten, 2002, pp. 84-90) and no longer supported Dutch participation in this mission. Indeed, after July

1995, the reports suggested that the Netherlands should never have wanted to participate in such an endeavour.

Nevertheless, society remained supportive of the mission. In 1992, a majority of the Dutch civilians was pro intervention in Yugoslavia, and this remained the case, by and large, until 1995, although by then support for the intervention diminished a bit (Everts, 2000; Moelker & Soeters, 2003; Wieten, 2002). Among the Dutch public, there was some sympathy with the Dutchbat soldiers, as Dutch civilians believed that they had done what they could, but had been misinformed about the preconditions and feasibility of the mission by more powerful actors like the government and the UN (Klep & Winslow, 1999, p. 117). However, the fall of Srebrenica and the ineffectual role Dutchbat played also fed into perceptions among the general public that the Netherlands was not a martial country — as was proven by their soldiers who were willing, but simply unable, to fight. This was not seen as personal deficiency on the part of soldiers; they were simply not heroes because the Netherlands was not a country that produced warriors (Klep & Winslow, 1999, pp. 116-117; Van der Meulen & Soeters, 2005, p. 545). However, the Dutchbat soldiers were ridiculed because of this — especially their commander, Karremans (Klep, 2019d, p. 215). In the Netherlands, The concept of ‘the Karremans feeling’ gained popularity. Its meaning came down to ‘a combination of bad luck, helplessness and passivity’ (Klep & Winslow, 1999, p. 117). The popularity of this expression applied to the general conviction that the Dutch were typically more passive and anxious than decisive and courageous.

Aftermath

What happened?

What characterizes the aftermath of the Srebrenica mission, is the public debate on what exactly happened shortly before and during the fall of the Safe Area. Shortly after the fall, the Dutch government instructed the Netherlands Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies (NIOD) to investigate the political decision-making process and what happened in Srebrenica. In September 1995, a detailed briefing among the soldiers had to provide more clarity about what had happened. The servicemen who had been in the enclave when it fell were interviewed by intelligence personnel and two military police officers. The interviews focused on what they had seen and experienced (Klep, 2005a; Molendijk, 2020), and this evidence was later compiled into a report by NIOD. The ensuing report came out in 2002. To a certain extent, its conclusions were that Dutchbat should be exonerated of blame, as the report stressed that the international community and the Dutch government were to blame for what had gone wrong (NIOD, 2002). A few days after the report was published, the Cabinet stepped down (Van Gils, 2005b).

In the years that followed, investigative journalists kept digging into what had happened in Srebrenica, and some suggested that NATO allies had had intelligence about

the Bosnian Serb invasion, but had failed to inform the Netherlands. In 2015, 20 years after the fall of Srebrenica's Safe Area, a documentary (Dopheide et al., 2015) comprehensively addressed the possibility that other countries had known about the Bosnian Serbs wanting to take over Srebrenica. Among others, the former Minister of Defence, Joris Voorhoeve, was interviewed in this documentary. Around the same time, he published a book in which he described a possible secret agreement of larger, more powerful countries regarding withholding any air support in case of attack by Bosnian Serbs (Cohen & Hijzen, 2016; Dopheide et al., 2015; Voorhoeve, 2015). These new conjectures resulted in a new NIOD inquiry into the international agreements, the decisions that were made regarding providing air support, and the possible existence of prior knowledge about the Bosnian Serbs' attack. No evidence was found to support them. However, the report stressed that researchers had limited access to sources and underlined the importance of continuing the investigation into what had actually happened (NIOD, 2016).

Recognition and appreciation

Specific signs of recognition and appreciation on the part of the Ministry of Defence were mainly directed at Dutchbat III veterans and not so much at Dutchbat I and II. In 2006, the Ministry of Defence made a Dutchbat III insignia available. One soldier was awarded a decoration for bravery during the fall of Srebrenica (Netherlands Institute of Military History (NIMH), 2010).

In 2015, a Dutchbat III working group, an initiative started by veterans themselves, conducted an inquiry which found that many veterans were still suffering from the negative public image of their mission. They felt the media had painted them in a very negative light and that this had shaped how the average Dutch citizen viewed them. The inquiry also found that the veterans held grudges towards the Ministry of Defence and the politicians who had been responsible, as they had not done anything to speak up for them and change the negative public perception (Borstlap, 2018, p. 3). Following the inquiry, Dutchbat III veterans approached the Prime Minister and the Minister of Defence, which promised to open its own inquiry into the well-being of Dutchbat III veterans.

On Veterans Day 2016, the Minister of Defence stated in a speech that Dutchbat had been sent to Srebrenica on 'an assignment which – even beforehand – was impracticable' (Borstlap, 2018, pp. 5-6). In response to this, 12 Dutchbatters went to court to demand compensation from the government (Klep, 2019a; Sommer, 2016). In the period that followed, more and more Dutchbat soldiers joined them. The court proceedings were suspended when the roll out of a comprehensive study into the well-being, experiences, and needs of Dutchbat III veterans was announced (De Volkskrant, 2018).

As for the societal views on Srebrenica and Srebrenica veterans, a public survey, conducted in 2019, found that 41% of the Dutch public thought the mission to Srebrenica had been justified, and 12% thought it had not. Some 50% of the respondents

were neutral. Just over half of the respondents said that they appreciated the veterans who had been deployed to Srebrenica, and 9% said they did not. Some 40% did not have an opinion on this (Bot & Konings, 2019). Hence, although Dutch civilians were not distinctly enthusiastic about Dutch participation in the mission, they were not very critical either. It is important to note that there were no striking differences between these figures and the figures for the other two missions in this study.

Studies on veterans

Three recent studies are particularly relevant regarding this group of veterans. One is the Ministry of Defence inquiry into the experiences of Dutchbat III veterans (Olf et al., 2020). The other two focused on Dutchbat I, II, and III (Driessen, 2021; Molendijk, 2020).

In 2020, the report on well-being among Dutchbat III veterans was finalised. In his preliminary research, the key author, Borstlap, described the disappointment and shame that Dutchbat III veterans felt because of negative or simply incorrect media coverage and how they felt betrayed because the Ministry of Defence had done nothing to correct this image (Borstlap, 2018). The large study that followed found that a significantly higher percentage of Dutchbat III veterans thought that the mission had influenced their lives exclusively negatively (33%) when compared to the rest of the veterans (6%) (Olf et al., 2020, pp. 42-43). While feelings of camaraderie when looking back on the mission were comparable to other veterans (80%), feelings of frustration and powerlessness were more common among Dutchbat III veterans than among other veterans. Some 75% of the Dutchbat III veterans said that they looked back on the mission with feelings of frustration, but only 30% of the other veterans did. Eighty percent of Dutchbat III veterans felt powerless, versus 31% of other veterans (ibid, p. 45). Twenty percent of Dutchbat III veterans judged their present quality of life to poor, compared to 5% of the rest of the veterans. Still, the mean grade the veterans gave to their quality of life was 7.3 out of 10 (ibid, p. 48). The study also found that a larger proportion of Dutchbat III veterans experienced a need for care and support, compared to veterans from other missions. Also, a (large) majority of those who experienced this need said it was partly or completely because of their deployment experience, while among the veterans of other missions, a minority indicated this. Reactions of acquaintances, friends, and family to the Dutchbat III mission were also more negative compared to those of other missions.

When asked whether they identified as a veteran, some Dutchbatters said they had distanced themselves from the mission and their military past and, therefore, from being a veteran. Others said that identifying as a veteran made them feel positive about their military service, and the camaraderie and social bonds they had developed. Some said that, as the years accumulated, they identified more strongly as a veteran, something they connected to growing older (Olf et al., 2020, p. 110). Two-thirds of Dutchbat III veterans did not feel appreciated by the state and the Ministry of Defence, and 84%

did not feel appreciated by the media, compared to 14% and 15% respectively of the rest of the veterans. Only 2% said to feel appreciated by society in general (Oloff et al., 2020, pp. 70-71), compared to a third of the general veteran population. In the Dutchbat III veterans' written comments, highly evident are struggles to give the deployment a suitable place in their life stories, as are sentiments of feeling abandoned and betrayed by the UN, the Dutch government, the media, and society in general (Oloff et al., 2020).

The same sense of betrayal was described by Molendijk (2020), who included Dutchbat I, II and III, as well as Uruzgan veterans, in her study on moral distress among veterans. She stressed that Dutchbat veterans felt betrayed by their government, the Ministry of Defence, and the media. Also, they felt misrecognized by the wider society, which either judged them negatively or admired them for their courage. Both reactions the veterans perceived to be too one-dimensional to do right to the complex reality. This resulted in soldiers feeling estranged from society as well as from themselves as they struggle to create a self-image that does justice to their complex experiences.

Driessen (2021) described how veterans tried to process their complex experiences by revisiting the site of deployment. As part of her dissertation, she conducted a qualitative study among Dutch veterans who had been deployed in Former Yugoslavia in 1992–2002. While this is a longer period than solely the deployment to Srebrenica, and includes other UNPROFOR locations as well as NATO missions, she found that the association with Srebrenica has kept many of them from talking about their experiences, even when they were deployed in another time frame and/or in another area of former Yugoslavia. The stories of veterans in Driessen's study were characterised by the discrepancy between wanting to act and powerlessness (p. 7), as well as anger towards the Dutch government and the UN for sending the soldiers on this impossible mission (p. 8). On top of that, upon return to the Netherlands, they felt judged by the general public. This all caused difficulties for how they found meaning in the mission. Their return trips to Srebrenica made it possible for them to validate or revise their memories, and they indicated that afterwards they felt more able to share these memories with their family and friends.

To add to the impressions these studies give of veterans' identification processes and their experiences of societal appreciation, I measured the answers given in the group that was deployed to former Yugoslavia in the years between 1992 and 1995 in the data of Five Years Core Data Veterans (Duel, Dirksen, & Reijnen, 2021).¹⁶ The results found that 58% said they felt like a veteran, some 50% felt connected to other veterans, 64% said they were proud of their veteran status, and 25% said they actively expressed their veteran identity.

16 This includes Dutchbat I, II and III but also Dutch UNPROFOR soldiers located in other parts of former Yugoslavia in 1992–1995.

Media

Unlike the mission in Lebanon, the mission in Srebrenica continues to be of interest to journalists. The horrific ending and the question of whether the Netherlands could have done more to prevent this from happening, together with continuing claims from relatives of the deceased Bosnian men — as well as from Dutch veterans — have maintained media interest in this mission (ANP, 2015a, 2015b; Brouwers, 2021b; Dopheide et al., 2015; Flevoland, 2015; Jansen & Van der Mee, 2017; Keultjes, 2021; Sommer, 2016; Van Dalen, 2016; De Volkskrant, 2018). Furthermore, every July the media report on the genocide commemorations (see, e.g. Keultjes, 2020; Molijn, 2020; Van Huet, 2020).

A large study on media reporting on veterans found that, in the period August 2017–July 2018, 40 of 527 articles reporting on Netherlands missions mentioned the mission in former Yugoslavia (Cozzi, Dirksen, & Van Der Werf, 2018, p. 12). Most of these articles concerned Srebrenica, and highlighted mental health issues among Srebrenica veterans (De Telegraaf, 2018b), drew on the study of Dutchbat III veterans that was announced in 2018 (Vos, 2018) and/or reflected on previous media reports about what had happened in Srebrenica (Bouma, 2017). They also reflected on Mladic's conviction and the emotions this evoked among Dutchbat veterans and relatives of the deceased (Trouw, 2017; Van 't Hof, 2017; Van Joolen, 2017). In July 2020, 25 years after the fall of the enclave, the three-part documentary *Srebrenica – The Powerless Mission of Dutchbat*, made by Coen Verbraak, was aired. In this documentary, several Dutchbat III veterans were interviewed about their experiences in Srebrenica. They spoke in detail about what they had seen and how they felt about it today. For instance, the footage of Karremans raising his glass with Mladic was described, providing a more nuanced understanding of an extraordinarily complex situation. The documentary was broadcast on national television on prime time over three consecutive days (Verbraak, 2020). The Veterans Institute compiled the reactions it received from viewers after the broadcasts. Many indicated a shift in opinion, namely, from judging Dutchbat III veterans to feeling sympathy for them. Some even apologised for how they had judged Dutchbat III in 1995 (Netherlands Veterans Institute, 2020a).

To summarise, Srebrenica was a complicated mission with admirable intentions on paper, which were impossible to put into practice. It has become part of the collective memory in the Netherlands, as evidenced by the inclusion of Srebrenica in the country's historical archive, *Canon van Nederland*.¹⁷ Driessen (2021) defined it as a 'national trauma' (p. 4). It is being dealt with by trying to find an answer to the question 'what happened?'

17 This archive includes fifty key historical events relevant to Dutch history, from megalithic tombs to the national unification displayed during international sport events, symbolised by the colour orange (Canon van Nederland, 2021). The canon was designed to provide an overview of 'what everyone ought to know, at the very least, about the history and culture of the Netherlands, as well as providing a framework for the teaching of History in Dutch schools.

— a question which is yet to be fully answered. Although most attention has focused on the fall of the Srebrenica Safe Area — and therefore on Dutchbat III veterans — I have chosen to include Dutchbat I and II veterans in my study, as Srebrenica has cast its shadow over their missions, too. The treatment of Dutchbat III by the media, its betrayal by the UN, and their negative public image, impacted on all Dutch veterans deployed to Srebrenica (see also Driessen, 2021; Molendijk, 2020, p. 116).

2.3 TASK FORCE URUZGAN IN AFGHANISTAN (2006 — 2010)

In 1997, military conscription in the Netherlands was postponed until further notice (Ministry of Defence, 2021d). The reason for this was that the end of the Cold War resulted in a less direct threat and in the Netherlands being able to increase its participation in international missions. For these missions, professional soldiers were required. Furthermore, budgetary cutbacks for the Ministry of Defence strengthened its desire to invest available funds in professionalisation instead of in temporary employees such as conscripts. After the debacle of Srebrenica, the Netherlands took part in NATO missions in Bosnia and Kosovo, and in a UN mission in Cyprus, among others. The Netherlands also participated in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan and the Stabilisation Force in Iraq (SFIR) (Ministry of Defence, 2021d), both NATO missions. For the purpose of my study, I focus on the veterans deployed under Task Force Uruzgan (TFU), part of ISAF, from 2006 until 2010. There were about 18,000 individual deployments for TFU, but an individual could be deployed more than once, so the total number of deployed Dutch TFU soldiers in this period probably lies somewhere around 15,000.

The mission: Context, reality on the ground, and the end

In response to the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, the United States (US) invaded Afghanistan in October 2001 (Jalali, 2017; Ministry of Defence, 2021b; Thomas, 2018). This operation (known as *Enduring Freedom*) was controversial: other countries questioned whether it was a legitimate act for international safety and stability, or rather just revenge for the terrorist attacks (Klep, 2011, p. 16). At the time of the attack, the radical Islamic Taliban was the most authoritative power in Afghanistan, but not the only one. At the local level, tribes had their own disputes. While bringing down the Taliban regime was achieved within just three months, defeating the Taliban and other Opposing Militant Forces (OMF) was more complicated, and over the next 20 years they continued to sow terror with road bombs and suicide bombs (Jalali, 2017; Klep, 2011; Thomas, 2018).

In December 2001, the international community together with several Afghan parties reached an agreement in Bonn. Afghan elections were planned, and an interim government was installed. The international community promised to safeguard peace, stability, and reconstruction in Afghanistan, through ISAF. The mission, under the mandate of the UN Security Council, was to last at least until the elections had taken place. In the end, it lasted until 2014. In 2003, NATO took over the command of ISAF. Initially, ISAF was only active in and around Kabul. In 2006, it spread to other parts of Afghanistan (Klep, 2011, pp. 16-17; NATO, 2015). Included in ISAF were so-called Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), tasked to cooperate with combat units in order to help the Afghan government restore public authority and order in all regions. They did so by liaising with the local population and local authorities in an effort to ensure local ownership in the reconstruction process (Klep, 2011, p. 17; NATO, 2015; Wester & Snel, 2019).

In 2005, the Netherlands was asked by NATO to supply a PRT and a supporting combat unit for the province of Uruzgan. After some months of political debate on whether the Netherlands should send troops and, if so, what their tasks should be, a decision was made: the Netherlands would join ISAF in Uruzgan (Elands, Van Woensel, & Valk, 2019). Due to a lack of clarity about the objectives of the mission, the Dutch armed forces interpreted the mission's goal broadly: TFU was to secure safety and stability and stimulate socioeconomic growth and development (Grandia, 2015, p. 142; Molendijk, 2020, p. 64).

Participating in this mission was seen as an opportunity to restore the image of the Dutch armed forces, which was heavily damaged after Srebrenica. This mission was 'green', instead of 'blue', which meant it was a peace enforcing mission instead of a peace keeping mission. No impartiality was included in the mandate: the weaponry was heavier and the barrier to using violence was lower. By cooperating with Australia, the Netherlands secured a good partner, a lesson learned from Srebrenica, where this was absent (Grandia, 2015, pp. 128-129; Klep, 2011, p. 84). Due to the hazardous circumstances in Uruzgan, as well as the lessons learned from earlier missions, two medical teams were included in the rotations, one in Camp Holland and the other in Deh Rawood. These teams included a general practitioner, a social worker, a spiritual counsellor, and a psychologist. The deployed servicemen could consult them when needed (Vermetten et al., 2014). As well as establishing good relations with the local population, the Dutch also had to train Afghan police and army personnel and work closely with them (Ministry of Defence, 2021b). The Netherlands built their headquarter, Camp Holland, close to the province's main city, Tarin Kowt. Other posts were Poentjak, 10 kilometres north of Tarin Kowt, Camp Hadrian near the city of Deh Rawood, and Volendam, near Camp Hadrian (Klep, 2011, p. 8). While Task Force Uruzgan was being set up, the province became less safe due to insurgencies. Therefore, 1,500 Dutch soldiers with equipment and transport vehicles were added to the mission (Ibid, p. 37). Initially, the small PRTs and combat units were deployed for four months, and the staff who remained at the base were deployed

for six months. The PRT, however, quickly noticed that their deployment period was too short to gain the trust of local leaders and their deployment was therefore prolonged to six months in 2007 (Ministry of Defence, 2021b).

In the beginning of the mission the level of violence in Uruzgan was lower than in the surrounding provinces of Kandahar and Helmand, and some said this was because of the Dutch approach, which was characterised by visiting and talking to local leaders. Others claimed that Uruzgan was simply not so important to the local military groups, collectively known as the OMF, which were fighting the NATO battalions (Zaalberg, 2013). Between 2006 and the beginning of 2007, five servicemen died, all due either to accidents or suicide. Still, some Dutch politicians expressed their astonishment about the level of violence in Uruzgan. This was still higher than they had expected beforehand. It was not until the battle for Chora in April 2007, when the Dutch fought for two days to oust the Taliban, that the first Dutch soldier lost his life in combat (Klep, 2019d, pp. 218-219). In the years that followed violent incidents increased, and 20 soldiers lost their lives either in firefights, road bombings, or missile attacks, and 140 were (severely) wounded in action (Elands et al., 2019; Klep, 2011; Rietjens, 2012).

In 2008, a political debate began about extending the mission for two years. After the leaders of a few political parties visited the troops in Afghanistan, a majority of political parties was convinced that it should be. The only condition preventing the decision to extend the mission was finding a second partner besides Australia to support the Dutch in Uruzgan. Georgia, France, Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic were all willing to lend support, either in manpower or equipment. Therefore, the Netherlands was able to reduce the number of servicemen from 1,700 to 1,400, and announce that the mission would be extended on a reduced scale (Klep, 2011, p. 53).

Although the Uruzgan soldiers were more heavily armed than Dutch soldiers on peacekeeping missions, resources were still too limited to make a big and lasting difference to safety and stability. Indeed, Uruzgan veterans called themselves an 'army of beggars' as they had to ask other countries for ammunition when theirs ran out. Furthermore, there were too few Dutch troops to create lasting stability in the heavily differentiated area of Uruzgan (De Ruijter et al., 2011; Klep, 2011, pp. 163-164; Molendijk, 2020, p. 66).

In 2010, NATO sent a letter to the Dutch Minister for Foreign Affairs, requesting the extension of the mission in Uruzgan for at least one more year. At that time, the Dutch government comprised a coalition of three parties, two of which were in favour of extension, and one against. After a political struggle, the cabinet fell over the decision on whether or not to extend the mission (ANP, 2010). After that, the Netherlands withdrew from Uruzgan.



Patrol in Chora (Netherlands Institute of Military History (NIMH), 2021c)

Public opinion during the mission

From the beginning to the end of the mission, Uruzgan caused controversy and debate in the Netherlands. In 2003, the United States were criticised for invading Iraq. And in 2005, humanitarian scandals such as the treatment of Afghan prisoners in Abu Graib by American soldiers were covered by the media. Most Dutch politicians were therefore not keen on helping the United States in their battle in Afghanistan. However, the Christian Democrats, the leading party of the Dutch government by that time, were in favour of joining the mission in Uruzgan. In the media, they reasoned why the Netherlands should contribute to Task Force Uruzgan, using varying narratives: to help NATO; to fight terrorism; out of self defence against terrorism spreading to Europe; or simply to help the local Afghan people. Although they presented different reasons, all were characterised by a moral obligation to do what they thought was right (Dimitriu & De Graaf, 2016; Ringsmose & Børgesen, 2011). The narrative about helping the Afghan people resonated most within the wider society. An opinion poll in 2007 showed that a large majority (86%) of Dutch citizens were in favour of reconstruction efforts, while almost half (46%) endorsed the Dutch military engaging in combat in Afghanistan (Dimitriu & De Graaf, 2016, p. 11).

Generally, the government pledged that the mission would be 'civilised' and had the prime goal of helping the people, while it would also have the power to act in a more martial way if need be. The government also distanced itself from American operations in Afghanistan by presenting a different 'Dutch' approach. In this way, the government

created an understanding among the public that Dutch troops would not be engaging in combat that much (Dimitriu & De Graaf, 2016; Klep, 2011; Molendijk, 2020; Ringsmose & Børgesen, 2011). During the mission, Dutch politicians claimed that this friendly approach received international approbation and was seen as best practice for liaising with the local population. Whether the approach was typically Dutch and whether it indeed received so much international praise is contested. Also, it is questionable whether this was indeed a chosen strategy rather than an adaptation due to scarce resources (Klep, 2011, pp. 170-177; Zaalberg, 2013). This pro Uruzgan narrative was, however, undermined by a counter narrative from the opposing parties, namely that the mission in Uruzgan was presented as a rebuilding mission, while it was actually a combat mission. Although the Ministry of Defence never claimed that TFU was exclusively about either reconstruction or combat, this dichotomy was taken up by the media and resurfaced in media coverage throughout the duration of the mission (Dimitriu & De Graaf, 2016).

While the mission was being debated, the participating soldiers received positive treatment. Typical of public opinion at the time was 'the soldier in Uruzgan' being nominated as 'the Dutchman of the year' by Elsevier magazine, which awards this title every year. The reasoning given for this choice portrays public opinion very well: 'This force of sixteen hundred men has succeeded in transforming a combat mission into a reconstruction mission. In this way, they opposed the political pessimism in The Hague' (Elsevier Weekblad, 2021). There was also media coverage on the soldiers' reality on the ground. Reporters joined patrols and witnessed combat action first-hand (Klep, 2019b, pp. 144-145). When the Dutch suffered their first combat casualties in 2007, Dutch media paid a lot of attention to these events. By 2008, however, combat in Uruzgan was no longer a novelty, and deaths in combat received less coverage. Exceptions were the friendly fire incident in January 2008 and the death in combat of the son of the Chief of Defence in May 2008. Research shows that reports on Dutch casualties did not erode public support for the mission. Rather, it seemed that the support increased a little after combat deaths in Uruzgan (Dimitriu & De Graaf, 2016, p. 15).

Aftermath

Recognition and Appreciation

Several medals and insignias were awarded to Uruzgan veterans by the Ministry of Defence, besides the standard commemorative medals. Of all Afghanistan veterans, 43 received a bravery award (Ministry of Defence, 2021b). Among these, three individuals and the Corps Commando Troops received the highest award of the Military Order of William for their performance in Uruzgan. This medal had not been awarded since the UN mission in Korea in the 1950s (Klep, 2019c; Ministry of Defence, 2021c, pp. 170-173). From 2010, the Ministry of Defence started to award a combat insignia, which could be awarded retrospectively from 2001 onwards (Netherlands Veterans Institute, 2017a).

Exact numbers are not available, but it seems that it is primarily Uruzgan veterans who have applied for this insignia. In the open-ended questions of a large survey of ISAF veterans, most comments were about the selection criteria for the combat insignia, and on the way the insignia was awarded (Wester & Snel, 2019). In my interviews, veterans expressed similar criticisms, as they thought the criteria were too broad, as well as annoyance with the application procedures — especially the fact of having to apply for the insignia themselves.

Regarding appreciation from society in general, a public opinion survey held in 2019 estimated that 39% of the general public thought the mission in Uruzgan was justified and 52% said they appreciated veterans deployed to Uruzgan, while 14% thought the mission was not justified, and 9% said they did not appreciate veterans who had been deployed on this mission (much). Respectively 46% and 39% were neutral in these matters (Bot & Konings, 2019). Again, the Dutch public was not jubilant about the mission and the veterans, but neither did they judge them particularly negatively.

Studies on veterans

I summarise three recent studies in this section. The first, *Prospective Research In Stress-Related Military Operations* (PRISMO), was a longitudinal study among (mainly) ISAF veterans. It found that 70% of veterans reported no mental health issues in the five years following deployment. The rest reported PTSD symptoms, fatigue, depression, or a combination of two or more of these problems. About 8% were receiving treatment from a psychologist five years after their deployment (PRISMO, 2018). Ten years after the deployment, 8% reported continuing PTSD symptoms. For the majority, these symptoms had decreased in intensity as the years went by (Van Der Wal, Vermetten, & Elbert, 2020).

While PRISMO measured psychological effects in particular, at the end of 2018 a large survey was conducted measuring how ISAF veterans were doing in a wider sense. It demonstrated that ISAF veterans rated the quality of their life almost equal to other veterans: a 7.7 on a scale of 10 compared to 7.8. They rated their experiences of camaraderie during deployment similarly to other veterans as well: 8 out of 10. Those who had worked outside the Forward Operation Base (FOB) reported more difficulties due to experiences that had made a lasting impression on them during deployment than those who had worked exclusively inside the FOB. About half of the respondents stated that these events had affected them severely during the mission, and a small minority stated that the events were still a burden to them at the end of 2018 (Wester & Snel, 2019, pp. 25-32). The study explicitly inquired about any positive effects of the deployment on veterans, and those most commonly felt were 'a stronger faith in one's own capability to handle difficulties' (69%) and 'an increased value of one's own life' (62%) (Wester & Snel, 2019, p. 24).

Zooming in on Uruzgan veterans in particular, a selected group within the larger group of ISAF veterans, Molendijk (2020) described how, as with the Dutchbat veterans in her study, Uruzgan veterans felt betrayed by the government and misunderstood by society. Lack of clarity about the mission, particularly the downplaying of the level of violence by politicians, was one of the causes of this sense of betrayal. The political debate surrounding the prolongating and, two years later, the end of the mission, added to their sense of lack of state support for the soldiers deployed to Uruzgan. They also experienced the reactions in the wider society as too simplistic to be meaningful to veterans.

Indeed, secondary analyses of the data on Uruzgan veterans in the *Five Years Core Data Veterans* (Duel, Dirksen, & Reijnen, 2021) show that not more than 25% of Uruzgan veterans felt appreciated by society, and only some 33% felt appreciated in media coverage. Furthermore, 42% felt appreciated by the state and the Ministry of Defence and 57% felt appreciated as a veteran by their family and friends. When it came to 'feeling like a veteran', 57% said they did, and 42% felt connected to other veterans. Although 84% of the Uruzgan veterans felt proud to be a veteran, only 21% said they actively expressed this.¹⁸

Media

Media attention on Uruzgan has continued to the present day. The attention intensified in 2016, 10 years after the start of the mission, when it became clear that the Taliban was advancing in Uruzgan and had recaptured Tarin Kowt (Beerekamp, 2016; De Volkskrant, 2016; RTLNieuws, 2016) (see quotation in text box for how one of my respondents reflected on that development). The large study on newspaper reporting on veterans, mentioned earlier, showed that in the period August 2017 to July 2018, of 527 articles that covered a specific mission in which the Netherlands participated, 100 mentioned the mission in Afghanistan (Cozzi, Dirksen, & Van Der Werf, 2018, p. 12). However, most of these articles were focused on Major Marco Kroon, who had been awarded the first Military Order of William since the 1950s. The other articles mainly expressed concern about the effects of the mission, for example by covering the current situation in Afghanistan (see, e.g. De Boer, 2017). One article started by bluntly asking the reader 'What has been accomplished in Afghanistan with your tax money?'

'I really think it is pointless [puts hands in front of his mouth] ah yeah I think this is really bad [to say], you know, (...) yeah sure 'we have done it for peace and we have done it for this... and we have done it for that' and then I look back and I think: 'Dude. It is totally pointless.' I heard, two weeks ago, Tarin Kowt has fallen. All these kinds of places have fallen. (...) so much time, effort and money put into this and now Tarin Kowt is in the hands of the Taliban.'

18 Figures are derived from a secondary analysis on the data from *Core Data Veterans*, a survey that was run annually in 2014–2018 by the Veterans Institute.

(De Telegraaf, 2018c, front page). Another covered an exhibition *Uruzgan Now* which was set up in the Military Museum in Soesterberg, and said that the exhibition 'turns around the negative image' of what has been accomplished in Uruzgan (Ten Tije, 2018, p. 1). The same negative image was expressed in articles covering the 2017 request of the US to send more Dutch troops to NATO's Mission Resolution Support in Afghanistan. Fears were voiced that the Netherlands would send new troops, even though the last mission to Afghanistan was perceived as a failure in terms of achieving goals: there had been dozens of Dutch casualties and still no Afghan stability and safety in sight (Keultjes, 2017, 2018; Piepers, 2018; Righton, 2018). There was also some coverage on how veterans look back on specific incidents, such as a grenade explosion that might have been caused on purpose by a Dutch soldier (Van Joolen, 2018), and the friendly fire incident of 2008 (De Telegraaf, 2018a, 2018d; Van Joolen & Veerman, 2018). Overall, media reports in 2017 and 2018 focused on the effects of the mission in Uruzgan on the stability, safety, and socioeconomic development of the region.

More recently, the question of whether soldiers in Uruzgan had crossed a line when using violence that caused civilian casualties is featuring in media articles. As previously mentioned in Chapter One, two Uruzgan veterans have sought media attention with stories about how they believe they overstepped the mark (Broere, 2020; Van der Ziel, 2020). Furthermore, the media have been covering the accusation by lawyer Zegveld concerning Afghan civilian deaths during the Battle for Chora, with which she has charged the Ministry of Defence. She had previously also made charges against the Ministry because of civilian deaths resulting from military actions in Srebrenica, Indonesia, and during the train hijacking in 1977 in De Punt (see, e.g. EenVandaag, 2021; Van der Ziel, 2021; Verbeek, 2018). This court case received attention in the documentary *Betrayal of Chora [Verraad van Chora]*. Documentary maker Can made two documentaries about the Battle for Chora, the first exploring what happened (Can & Blom, 2016), and the second posing critical questions about whether the actions of the Dutch armed forces were legitimate during this battle, and whether the Afghan civilian deaths resulting from the battle could have been prevented (Can, 2021).

Further, developments in Afghanistan gave rise for media attention. On May 1st, developments in NATO troops started to withdraw from Afghanistan as the successor of ISAF, the Resolute Support Mission, had reached its end. Immediately, Taliban started to re-conquer parts of Afghanistan. By August 2021, they possessed a large part of Afghan territory. The Afghan president fled the country as Taliban troops took over Kabul on August 15th. The airport of Kabul was overflowed with Afghans aiming to escape the Taliban regime. Dutch media reported on these developments, with a special concern for the Afghans who had helped the Dutch troops at the time, for instance the interpreters. Although the Taliban were winning territory, little appeared to be done in order to prepare for evacuation of the Afghan collaborators and their families (see, e.g. Brasseme, 2021;

Brouwers, 2021a; Van Zon, 2021). Some articles even drew a comparison with Srebrenica, where the Netherlands 'failed to do what is right as well' (Hengeveld, 2021; Kraak, 2021; Theirlynck, 2021). Also, there was some attention for how Dutch Afghanistan veterans perceived recent developments (Feenstra, 2021; RTLNieuws, 2021; Timmers, 2021).

All in all, the last word on the Dutch mission in TFU has not yet been spoken. It remains heavily debated. Although the veterans experienced great stress and tension by witnessing violence or by having been in danger themselves, this has, on the whole, not affected their quality of life in comparison to the rest of the veterans. However, the veterans felt they do not receive much appreciation from actors such as the state, the media, and wider society. Media interest, however, has been — and still is — quite high. The public debate focuses on making sense of the mission and whether it has had the desired effect. The return of the Taliban regime in August, 2021, shortly after the last Western troops had withdrawn, gives reason for even more pessimism about the effectiveness of the mission and leads to increased reflection on political decision making concerning international military missions.

2.4 SUMMARY

This section summarises the most important similarities and differences of the three missions (see table 2.1). The missions took place in different time periods and, therefore, in different societal contexts, ranging from a driving concern for the Warsaw Pact to fears of fundamentalist terrorism. The professionalisation of the Dutch military was visible in differences in preparation for the missions and the terms of employment of the soldiers. The missions themselves differed in goals, mandates, and international context. Lebanon and Srebrenica have some similarities in terms of the kind of mission they were and the mandates they had, as they were both peace keeping missions under the UN flag. In contrast, Task Force Uruzgan was a peace enforcing mission under NATO and had more military vigour. As a consequence, TFU involved more combat situations and therefore more Dutch casualties than the other two missions. The overarching similarity is that none of the missions accomplished its goals, as those appeared to be overambitious, lacked sufficient weaponry, and/or were vaguely formulated. The end of the missions in Lebanon and Uruzgan were largely politically motivated, while the ending of Srebrenica of course stands out from the other two missions as it was forced by one of the local militant parties.

When it comes to what is known about these veteran groups nowadays, Srebrenica appears to have impacted the lives of veterans in a more severe way than Lebanon and Uruzgan. Still, in all groups, a minority suffers from mental health issues as a result of deployment. There is a sense of disappointment or even betrayal among all three groups of

Table 2.1 Characteristics of the three missions

	Lebanon	Srebrenica	Uruzgan
Time	1979-1985	1994-1995	2006-2010
International context	United Nations - UNIFIL	United Nations - UNPROFOR	NATO – ISAF
Type of mission	'Blue'–peacekeeping with violence as ultimate resort	'Blue'–peacekeeping with violence as ultimate resort	'Green'–peace enforcing, violence allowed to secure goals of mission
Soldiers deployed	Mainly conscripts	Mainly professional soldiers	Professional soldiers
Decorations of bravery	0	1	43
Casualties due to violence	1	2	20
'I feel like a veteran'	73%	58% (UNPROFOR 1992-1995)	57%
'I feel connected to other veterans'	63%	51% (UNPROFOR 1992-1995)	42%
'I am proud to be a veteran'	81%	64% (UNPROFOR 1992-1995)	84%
'I actively express that I am a veteran'	30%	25% (UNPROFOR 1992-1995)	21%
'I feel appreciated by media coverage'	45%	2% (Dutchbat III)	32%
'I feel appreciated by society'	37%	16% (Dutchbat III)	24%
Newspaper articles in 2017-2018	10	40 (mentioning former Yugoslavia in general)	100 (mainly about Marco Kroon)
Present public debate characterised by	Silence	What happened? Who is to blame?	Effect of mission on local situation
Support for mission by the Dutch public	Justified: 37% Not justified: 12% Neutral / I don't know: 51%	Justified: 41% Not justified: 13% Neutral / I don't know: 47%	Justified: 39% Not justified: 14% Neutral / I don't know: 47%
Support for veterans by the Dutch public	I appreciate (a lot): 51% I do not appreciate (at all): 8% Neutral / I don't know: 42%	I appreciate (a lot): 52% I do not appreciate (at all): 9% Neutral / I don't know: 39%	I appreciate (a lot): 52% I do not appreciate (at all): 9% Neutral / I don't know: 39%

veterans for various reasons: lack of care and compensation after the mission (Lebanon), being abandoned by the state (Srebrenica), and incorrect perceptions of the mission by politicians (Uruzgan). When it comes to identifying as a veteran, Lebanon veterans more often said they felt like veterans than the veterans of the other two groups. They also felt more connected to other veterans, while Uruzgan veterans scored the lowest in this respect. Feelings of pride were almost equal among Lebanon and Uruzgan veterans, and

lower among veterans of former Yugoslavia, among whom were Dutchbat I, II and III. Uruzgan veterans were the least active in expressing their veteran status, while Lebanon veterans were the most. A sense of appreciation from media reports and from wider society were experienced most by Lebanon veterans, followed by Uruzgan veterans and then Dutchbat III veterans, who scored the lowest by far. Appreciation by society was most felt by Lebanon veterans, followed by Uruzgan veterans and again, Dutchbat III veterans said to feel the least appreciated by the general public (see table 2.1).

Concerning the actual level of appreciation felt in society, surveys have demonstrated that it was more or less equal for the three missions and their veterans. However, the way the missions were publicly debated does differ. While the debate about Lebanon after the mission ended is characterised by silence, the debate about Srebrenica continues to focus on what happened and who is to blame for what happened. Compared to the start of this study in 2016, it seems that the debate on Uruzgan is changing direction since 2020, which is further strengthened by developments in Afghanistan in 2021. While at first the tendency was to focus on whether the mission improved the local situation in any way, more recently the question has been whether the mission worsened the situation of the locals — as Dutch aggressiveness costed Afghan civilian lives and locals who cooperated with the Dutch are in danger now that the Taliban has returned.

In the next chapter I elaborate on how the veterans in this study look back on and integrate their mission in their life stories, and how this relates to how they identify as a veteran.





3

**Veterans from a veteran point of view:
Images in narratives**

As I described in the theoretical outline in the first chapter, the definition of a veteran is defined by state law. However, a veteran can choose whether or not to identify with this label (Jenkins, 2014c). What it means to identify with a certain label is often constructed and expressed through storytelling (Argenti & Schramm, 2009; Bruner, 1990; Davis & Manderson, 2014; Fivush, Brooker, & Graci, 2017; Giddens, 1991; Gryzman & Mansfield, 2017; McAdams & McLean, 2013). Inspired by Sørensen (2015) and Tomforde (2005) (see Chapter One), who have both detailed how soldiers and veterans use images of veterans in their narratives, I demonstrate, in this chapter, how the veterans in my study constructed an image of 'the veteran' — a typical character that most veterans imagine. In their narratives, they argued why they identified as veteran by relating to this representation. I demonstrate this by highlighting key elements in the narratives of the veteran I interviewed. These elements largely comprise autobiographical stories before, during, and after military service and deployment: they are stories about respondents' efforts to either enter or avoid the veteran world; about how they view themselves, work, home, and hobbies; and about what identifying — or not — as a veteran means and brings to them.

The chapter is divided into three sections, each devoted to veterans of one of the three missions that are the focus of my thesis: Lebanon, Srebrenica, and Uruzgan. Each section opens with a personal story from a veteran of the mission concerned, that reflects the core perceptions shared by my respondents from that mission. I then present images of 'the veteran' abstracted from respondents' narratives, and explain how each image was constructed, how the veterans positioned themselves in relation to the image, and the consequences that arose from this process. The chapter concludes with an overview of the differences and similarities between images and narratives in the three veteran groups, and connects these to illuminating literature in the field.

3.1 LEBANON VETERANS: RESTORING THE CONNECTION

Lebanon veteran Hans and I met at his workplace; he owned a shop selling car parts. 'I thought this was the best place to meet,' he said, after introducing himself, 'so you can see whether I am still doing something with this whole being-a-veteran thing.' We walked through the store to a garage, where two old UN vehicles were parked. Hans told me that he maintained these vehicles himself, and showed them at as many veteran events as he could. We entered a backyard behind the garage, where a shipping container had been placed. In this container, Hans had built a small UNIFIL-museum, in which items that would be familiar to any Dutch Lebanon veteran were showcased: a reproduction of the original mailbox in which soldiers' letters were collected to be sent home; a recruiting poster to motivate conscripts to go to Lebanon bearing the text 'a

different conscription'; a large map of South Lebanon with the location of the Dutch posts marked; and old UNIFIL uniforms.

We sat down and Hans immediately started telling me about his volunteer work for the Ministry of Defence, for example at the army's open house. He told me that he had always been attracted by the military way of life, and that at the age of 16 he had applied to join the Marines. He was accepted, but when it became known that he was still in high school, he was told to get his high school diploma before enlisting. When he was about to graduate, he received a call for conscription. Although he explained that he had already been accepted to the Marines, he was assigned to the army. While it was a different career path to his initial plan, the army suited him so well that he decided to stay as a short-term volunteer, with a contract for five years. His ambition, then, was a career in the military, in which he would 'to climb to the top of the ladder,' as he put it. The first step, he said, was to become an officer.

By the age of 21 he had achieved the rank of officer and applied to go to Lebanon with Dutchbatt. He described his key motivation for applying for this deployment as wanting to 'get to know myself better' and 'to find out whether I could function well in extreme circumstances'. In Lebanon, he was the commander of some 45 men, all conscripts. Hans' reminiscences were very positive: 'These were all men made of gold,' he said. His deployment started in March 1982. Three months later, Israel invaded Lebanon, after which the mission changed drastically: instead of being tasked with collecting intelligence and keeping watch over their area, they 'ended up in war, real war, for a week or so.' By the end of that week, Israeli forces had almost reached Beirut, the capital of Lebanon.

Sitting in his backyard museum, Hans explained to me how, after it had become evident that peacekeeping had failed, it was unclear to Dutchbatt what the goal of the mission now was. In the end, Dutchbatt decided its primary objective was to take care of refugees in their area and monitor the rule of law at local level. 'In that way, at least,' he said, 'we could give the local people some relief.'

Hans said he learned a lot from his deployment — about leadership, having to improvise, and about how others react to harsh circumstances. On return to the Netherlands, he was full of stories, but soon learnt that not everyone was eager to hear them.

I know that after two or three nights my wife said to me: 'come on, tonight we will talk about something else, because I have heard enough.' And I have been frustrated and pissed off about that for, well, even for years. (...) That has really stuck with me from that period, the Netherlands just continued [as though nothing had happened]. (...) You are so full of stories, but others just want to hear a couple of things and then 'well, nice, let's move on.' That experience was very frustrating.

He said he could imagine that other veterans 'have experienced issues because of that'. He called it a 'culture shock'.

Hans told me how the deployment had enabled him to develop valuable skills and knowledge about human nature, but also how it had had a considerable impact on his daily behaviour, although by the time I met him in 2017, this was much less than in the first years after his return.

Fortunately, I never had any traumatic things that bothered me, and I suffered no alcohol abuse — but things like 'where in the room do you choose to sit down' and 'what do you do when you enter a restaurant...'. In my opinion, that is the normal behaviour of every soldier who has been deployed. After six months of living under different circumstances where vigilance is higher than usual, you return to a country such as the Netherlands, which is relatively safe, but you do not switch over immediately. [He looks around like he is inspecting the surroundings] 'Where are the doors? Where is the emergency exit here?' You check everything. Right now, you see me sitting with my back towards the window. Before, this was impossible: I used to sit there [he points to an empty chair with its back to the wall, from which it would be possible to see both the inside and the outside], watching the entrance and the corridor at the same time.

Although he was offered a new contract, Hans left the service when his initial contract ended. He left because of the regulations around promotions, which did not seem right to him:

It was just about how long you were serving, not about your performance.

He started a family, and started his own business.

In around 2000, he first 'came into contact with the UNIFIL stuff' when he ran into a former soldier of his. Hans explained that this soldier had 'all kinds of issues' — referring to mental health problems. At the time, Hans did not feel he could help the soldier resolve his issues. Years later, in 2008, again by coincidence, he read an article in the local newspaper about somebody who was repairing an old army vehicle. He recognised this man as a former soldier in his unit and, on impulse, decided to contact him. Soon after that, he became involved in refurbishing vintage military vehicles. One day, he was invited to an event at the Ministry of Defence, where he displayed his Nekaf Jeep¹⁹ and a

19 This jeep is fabricated by the company Nekaf. The Dutch Ministry of Defence started to buy these jeeps in the 1950s.

replica of a soup kitchen. This snowballed and he began displaying his vehicles regularly at veteran events.

At the time of our interview, Hans said he was regularly in contact with his former soldiers. He was surprised by how they still called him 'lieut' — an abbreviation of lieutenant. Even some 40 years after the deployment, he said, he still felt responsible for their wellbeing: 'they are still *my* guys!' Over the years, veterans from other missions have joined what Hans called 'his' group. These were mainly veterans with problems, and Hans said he felt responsible for them, too. A couple of years ago he undertook formal training in providing buddy support for veterans, and realised he had been doing this informally for years.²⁰ Sometimes, veterans who were experiencing problems called Hans at night. He told me that he took the time to 'just sit down' with them and listen to their stories. He said he felt that it was a relief for these veterans to find somebody truly interested, who would listen without judging them.

After talking to Hans about his deployment and his involvement in the veteran world, I was confident that if anyone could tell me what it means to be a veteran, it was Hans. Expecting to receive a clear description, I asked him what being a veteran meant for him, personally. His answer surprised me:

Being a veteran, that's the weird thing — I don't feel like a veteran at all. What I do feel is a friendly relationship with a certain group of people. Is that being a veteran? Perhaps, I don't know. I did what I wanted to do at the time, and it was something special, yes it was different from what people usually do, and you find yourself in a special situation and afterwards you think 'I did it well.' (...) It is something special.

How can somebody so closely integrated in the veteran world *not* view himself as a veteran? During our conversation, Hans struggled with this himself. When responding to the question what being a veteran meant to him, he mentioned the bond that veterans have with one another, and the feeling of having done something out of the ordinary. During the analysis, when I considered Hans' narrative as a whole, the strong association he held between 'real veterans' and suffering psychological problems became clear. Although he expressed qualms about the image of the veteran as a person with PTSD — which he viewed as being dominant in the media — that very image was intertwined with his own narrative, to the extent that, because he himself was not suffering mentally, he was reluctant to identify with the label of veteran. Indeed, in several parts of his narrative mental health issues came up. When describing the veterans' return

20 The buddy support system among veterans who have left the armed forces has existed informally for decades within veteran organisations. In 2012, the system was formalised by the Veterans Platform, and training courses for aspiring buddies were set up (see Chapter One for details).

to the Netherlands after deployment, he explained that 'some guys developed issues' because of the 'culture shock'. When talking about the influence of deployment on his behaviour, he said that 'fortunately' he himself had not suffered from trauma. However, the first veteran he had encountered after his return home had had mental health issues and this had led Hans to see his role as a buddy supporting veterans who experience psychological problems.

It was clear that although Hans defined identification as veteran as feeling a bond with other veterans, he firmly related the importance of this connection to mental health issues.

Especially the first time at the army open house, I met crying grown-ups there, who tell me 'It feels like coming home' when they are at a replica of a post that we built. (...) That click, that belonging, that camaraderie is adding so much to one's wellbeing. (...) And, you know, the thing that really matters is — well, I am not a psychologist, but — guys with PTSD always must hold up an image, put on a mask, hold yourself up when with others. And then they are among their buddies, then they don't have to keep up appearances, then they can be themselves, and I've heard that several times, that it feels like coming home.

This illustrates that the veteran as an injured person was not the only image Hans had of 'the veteran', as he also described the veteran as a loyal buddy — a comrade to other veterans; and someone who has shared an extraordinary experience. These images recurred regularly in the narratives of the Lebanon veterans I spoke to. Lebanon veterans are a diverse group, ranging from conscripts to short term volunteers to lifelong career professionals. At the time of my fieldwork, the veterans I interviewed identified in varying ways. However, in their narratives, they consistently constructed the image of a veteran as an injured person (1), a loyal buddy (2), and/or as a person who had experienced something out of the ordinary (3). The images were not mutually exclusive; indeed, one narrative could hold multiple images of 'the veteran', as Hans' story illustrates.

My respondents explained why they did — or did not — identify with a particular image, largely though telling stories about their past and their present. In the following section, I elaborate on these three images I abstracted from their narratives, and discuss the consequences that arose from their portraying and positioning themselves in relation to a particular image.

The injured

Either explicitly or implicitly, the Lebanon veterans I interviewed made a connection between the label of veteran and psychological problems. Even if they were not suffering psychologically themselves, they still had this image of a veteran, as was evident in Hans' narrative. The veterans positioned themselves in relation to this image to the extent that if they were experiencing (or had experienced) mental health issues, they tended to identify as a veteran, but, if they had no such issues, they did not recognise themselves in the image of injured person, and so did not identify as a veteran.

The veterans made this connection between mental health issues and identifying as a veteran first when they spoke about the deployment — and especially about how the reality on the ground had not met their expectations, and the feeling of powerlessness they experienced during deployment. Disturbing memories entailed things that had happened to them that had been beyond their control, such as being held hostage or being shot at, or witnessing violence and the results of violence, such as dead bodies or injured children. Such experiences were events that happened to them, in which they were not able or not allowed to act. Those who suffered mental health issues later in life attributed them to this powerlessness, and the extreme circumstances they had experienced. Those who did not suffer from these issues nevertheless saw them as the probable causes of problems among other Lebanon veterans.

Concerning the role of the deployment in Lebanon veterans' narratives, what stood out most was the difference between those who were struggling with mental health issues and those who were not. Those with mental health issues tended to describe the deployment as a crucial turning point in their lives. These were the informants who had been suffering from problems for a long time by the time I met them, who were unable to work, and who experienced problems in their relationships with (ex)spouses and/or children. They often described a significant change to their character because of deployment — from being open, optimistic, and even sweet natured before deployment to becoming introverted, paranoid, and aggressive after deployment. The negative character traits were, in the narratives of these veterans, triggered or caused by the deployment, although most respondents stressed that they had not realised this for decades; it took an encounter with fellow veterans, either in real life or through the media, to realise the cause of their problems. On the other hand, veterans not experiencing mental health problems at the time of our interview, tended to see the deployment as a valuable experience from which they — eventually — had grown in a positive way. The deployment had increased their self-knowledge, deepened their insights into human nature, and broadened their view of the world. They did not regard the deployment as a crucial turning point in life. Rather, they saw it as one of the many experiences that had formed their personality as well as their view of the world. They also described other work experiences from which they had learned in a positive way, for example other deployments,

or perhaps a job that felt like it was a true calling. Most said they had maintained good relationships with their children, spouses, and other people in their lives. These veterans were hesitant to identify as a veteran. This indicates that a 'real veteran', in the eyes of the Lebanon veterans in this study, is someone who experiences severe negative influences in their lives as a result of deployment.

Lebanon veterans who were active as veterans at the time of our interview — for example through visiting veteran gatherings or even organising these events — all described a point in their life where they were reminded of their past as servicemen on deployment and their veteran status as a result. Often, they placed this moment somewhere between the end of the 1990s and 2010. None presented their first encounter with a veteran activity as planned. Rather, it was an impulse or a coincidence, similar to the experience Hans described. Some, for example, received invitations to reunions or other veteran gatherings, and decided impulsively to go. Others happened to see a veteran in the media and recognise their own story in his. One veteran told me he had decided to visit the beach in Scheveningen and, on his way there, had happened to stumble on a veteran event in The Hague: by coincidence it had been Veterans Day.

While their first encounter with the veteran world, for all my informants, was by chance, the effect that such chance encounters had differed between veterans who had mental health issues and those who did not. Those experiencing problems in their lives described the first encounter as an eye-opener that enabled them finally to see what was causing all the misery in their lives, and that motivated them to, for example, search for specialised health care. However, respondents who were active in the veteran world but who did not suffer from mental health issues presented their encounter with the veteran world as something fun, as a vivid reminder of the good old days. At the same time, they realised, through this encounter, that other Lebanon veterans were suffering from mental health problems. Most felt obliged — or at least motivated — to 'be there' for them, for instance through hosting veteran gatherings or become involved in buddy support. Those who did not feel this sense of responsibility might visit occasional reunions, but nothing more than that. The core reason they gave for this — besides that they were not (or were no longer) experiencing mental health problems — was that they viewed themselves as people 'who do not linger in the past'. They understood that other veterans might be more preoccupied with the veteran world, but they assumed that these veterans were experiencing a more intense impact from the deployment on their wellbeing.

Identification with their current job had a great impact on how my respondents identified (or not) as a veteran. Those who said they felt content in their current careers appeared to care less about their veteran status. Former corporal Daan is a good example: at the time of our interview, he was not able to work because of PTSD. However, he talked proudly about his job as a teacher, saying that he had finally found his true

calling, having tried several other occupations. Identifying as a veteran seemed to be of less importance for him than it was for former corporal Gerrit, who had never found an occupation that superseded his time in the military. Indeed, having left the service after his conscription finished, he returned a few years after his deployment, because he could not find his place in society:

I had a hard time, you know. From one job to another, I just didn't fit in... it turned out that PTSD was partially to blame. I already had that [PTSD] back then, but you don't notice that yourself. So, I just started searching and then I thought: I'll return to serving [in] the army.

YR: And there you no longer had that restless feeling?

Gerrit: Uh no, no. Because you feel like yourself again, you know, back in the uniform, and that makes a big difference. That is the same now, as I can go to therapy. I am happy that it is possible [to go to therapy] in Utrecht [military hospital], among soldiers, then I feel good, I feel safe there. While [other] people go to Oegstgeest, and so on, you know, but that is more [for] civilians, then I don't feel so.... And in Utrecht, those psychiatrists and psychologists also go on deployment, so they know exactly what is happening in such an area. So, that's easy for me. If I come into such an office, and there is a uniform in there, that is very nice for me.

Gerrit here raises an important social context — therapy — in which identifying as a veteran really mattered. Lebanon veterans who were in treatment at the time of our interview all used specialised veteran health care, either individually with a specialised veteran practitioner, or in a group with other veterans. Specialised health care for veterans acknowledges veterans as a separate social group and makes identifying as a veteran highly relevant for those in treatment in these institutions. Veterans who were not in treatment missed out on this context and did not have their veteran identity emphasised to them by a caregiver. Those veterans tended not to feel that the deployment had been the major factor that had impacted on who they were. This made it easier for them to see veteran activities as something 'fun', or to perceive other veterans as 'lingering in the past'.

Some Lebanon veterans were not active at all as veterans. These respondents emphasised that they did not 'need that' because they had so many other interesting things going on in their lives: 'Why would I do that, what is the use of that for me?' However, not identifying as a veteran had consequences for their general sense of identity. By refraining from identifying as a veteran, they were emphasising that they had moved

on from deployment and were living in the present, not in the past, and were fortunate enough to have other fulfilling things to identify with in their lives.

To summarise, for veterans with mental health issues, identifying as a veteran was significant, as the deployment was perceived to have had a major impact on who they were and where they stood in life. They were reminded, on a daily basis, that they were veterans, because the consequences of their deployment were always present.

Specialised veteran health care further fostered identification as a veteran, and identifying with the image of the injured veteran brought empowerment. A recurring aspect in the narratives of Lebanon veterans with mental health issues was that things had happened to them over which they had had little control, and identifying as a veteran — even if this had begun because of a chance encounter — was an act of empowerment. This empowerment had three elements: it gave them the choice to visit veteran gatherings; it provided an explanation for their misery; and it resulted in a lessening sense of social isolation as they could meet and bond with fellow veterans (social isolation is indeed a risk for veterans who experience lower quality of life, see Reijnen & Duel, 2020).

The loyal buddy

'The loyal buddy' is another veteran image that recurred in my respondents' narratives. Loyal buddies felt connected to other veterans in a special way, as they shared a similar past and supported those who were in need. An example of the loyal buddy is Hans, who, decades later, still felt responsible for his soldiers and felt like he must be there for them and for other veterans in need.

The image of the loyal buddy occurred most often when respondents were talking about the deployment: virtually all the Lebanon veterans mentioned this camaraderie as a positive memory of their deployment. Having each other's backs, as well as sharing the same dark humour, were memories they treasured. Veteran activities were a reminder of these good old days. At reunions, commemorations, and festivities, the Lebanon veterans shared stories about where they had been and what they had been through. Although they felt this connection in a more obvious way among fellow Lebanon veterans, they also experienced this when being among veterans from other missions. They saw the experience of being on deployment as something to bond over. To show this common denominator, they needed few words. Lebanon veterans frequently told me that 'just one word will do to understand each other'. Phrases such as: 'you know it by looking in the other's eyes, that you share something special' indicated that this shared understanding was also highly romanticised.

Besides having this shared experience, loyal buddies also recognised pain in each other and tried to help each other. For them, it was important to listen to other veterans' experiences, to show genuine interest, and to show that they understood. In doing so, they felt they were compensating for civilians who many veterans perceived as lacking

both interest and understanding. The stories they exchanged evoked a feeling among loyal buddies that they were not alone, or that they were not crazy for feeling as they did about their experiences. Veterans also told me that they missed the camaraderie of the military, which they never found in society. One consequence of identifying as a veteran was that this camaraderie was, at least partially, recaptured.

I would like to stress here that not every veteran experienced this deep mutual connection. For example, when Lebanon veterans shared with Hans where they had been stationed on the map in his UNIFIL museum, he perceived this as proof of a unique connection. However, other veterans, for example, Ernst, did not view themselves as veterans and felt no need to attend veteran events. As former corporal Ernst told me:

If I meet a veteran, I will talk about the mission a bit, but then I think, yeah
— [he breaks off and shrugs]

YR: It's not that you feel a bond because —

Ernst: No, it is a topic of conversation: 'where have you been? Oh there. What period? Have you experienced anything?' That's it, that's all there is. I mean, there are other things that are much more important to me, like family and that sort of stuff.

For Ernst, exchanging deployment locations did not create the feeling of being buddies, while Hans saw this as the start of a new comradeship — being a loyal buddy is a subjective matter.

The extraordinary

As I described in the previous section, Lebanon veterans tended to share their extraordinary experiences — the deployment to Lebanon — when they met. The veteran as someone who had done something out of the ordinary was a recurring image in respondents' narratives. How they positioned themselves in relation to this image depended on whether or not they viewed their deployment as an extraordinary experience. When they looked back with pride and still felt impressed by their experiences, this stimulated their identification as veteran. In contrast, Lebanon veterans who did not identify as a veteran, and who were not active in the veteran world, viewed the deployment as one of many things they had done in life and had moved on from. Although the deployment had been a major experience, it was not dominant in their identification at the time of the interview.

When talking about motivations for going on deployment, the veteran as a person who had extraordinary experiences was highly evident. For the professionals who made

the choice to go to Lebanon, it was the adventure that appealed to them. Also, they wanted to go on deployment to do what they had been trained for, and to see what they were worth in a crisis situation, similar to what Hans described. In general, conscripts who volunteered described an urge to do something useful, something more fun — or at least less boring — than what they had been doing during their conscription so far. In both cases, veterans described the deployment to Lebanon as something out of the ordinary.

Extraordinary experiences can only exist in relation to other people who lack these experiences. If everyone had these kinds of experiences, they would lose their exceptional character. The image of the veteran as a person who has had an extraordinary experience is therefore properly activated when talking about returning home after deployment. At this point, the extraordinary is confronted with the ordinary. While they came home full of stories about their exceptional experiences, most of the Lebanon veterans found that their partners, relatives, and friends showed a distinct lack of interest. As Hans summarised: 'Nice to have you back and, well, that's it.' Lebanon veterans thus felt alone with their extraordinary experiences; they felt misunderstood or even ignored by those who had not shared these experiences.

In later phases of their life, veterans' exceptionality was further underlined by officials speaking at veteran gatherings or events. Sometimes veterans I spoke to repeated phrases from these speeches verbatim when they tried to describe what it means to be a veteran. Consider this excerpt from an interview with Gerrit:

Well, veteran, that is just eh... In general, *you have done something for freedom*, so to speak. (...) Within myself I just feel, eh yeah, what do you say? Proud, not a hero, but, eh... what is it called? That *you did something that others wouldn't want to do*. What is the saying again? *We carry on where others quit*.

The phrases in italics are phrases that have been used by the Minister of Defence when talking about soldiers and veterans. This demonstrates that the Minister of Defence was a powerful actor who had a significant impact on veterans' processes of identity construction. The Minister's words fed feelings of exclusivity from wider society, while, at the same time, promoted a sense of inclusion in a group of people who had shared the same experience. Hence, the perception of having done something out of the ordinary strengthened group cohesion among veterans.

To summarise, mental health issues played a central role in the identification process among Lebanon veterans. The image of the veteran as injured person seemed to make veterans who were active in the veteran world reluctant to identify as a veteran if they did not have any issues. This image was further fostered by contextual factors

present in the lives of veterans with mental health issues, such as lack of employment or fulfilling relationships, or treatment in a facility that specialised in veterans. These factors made identifying as a veteran more relevant. Other images of 'the veteran' that emerged from Lebanon veterans' narratives were that of the loyal buddy and of a person with an extraordinary experience. The loyal buddy image emphasised the camaraderie experienced during deployment, while the extraordinary reflected an image fostered by formal discourse of the Ministry of Defence. The loyal buddy was connected with the image of the veteran as injured, as the loyal buddy image was of particular importance for veterans with mental health issues.

3.2 SREBRENICA VETERANS: HELPING AND HEALING

Srebrenica veteran Stefanie and I talked for about two hours in her cosy home. On her wall I saw pictures of her and her children, as well as one of Stefanie as a Dutchbat soldier in Srebrenica. She told me how happy she had been when she was admitted to the military at the age of 17: 'I was walking on air when I heard it.' The adventure and the steady income at only 17 made her 'as happy as Larry'. Three years later, she joined Dutchbat III as corporal in Srebrenica. Again, she described how happy this initially made her.

That was my ultimate goal. Helping people. It was an honour for me that I was allowed to go on deployment and to go help people.

She described how tension grew during her time in Srebrenica: lack of cigarettes, less and less food, the death of colleague Raviv van Renssen and, ultimately, the thousands of refugees seeking shelter in the compound. She kept faith that as long as she and her buddies could just keep going at the compound the situation would eventually be resolved. Looking back on that time as she talked to me, she attributed this attitude to her youth and naivety.

She narrated how she and others had made soup from the food that was left in the compound and had given it to the refugees. She had carried on doing what she had to do while distancing herself psychologically from everything that was going on.

Now I think: blimey, we just walked inside that hall with all those thousands of people. Unbelievable. The inhumanity.

The discrepancy between her intention for the mission — helping people — and the little she was eventually able to do to actually help them was still bothering her all those

years later. She still blocked some memories of the last days at the compound with all the refugees in a large hall, because, she said,

'I just can't handle it!'

In recent years, Stefanie had been treated for depression in a civil mental health institution. However, during treatment, she said she felt that her condition worsened:

I kept on thinking: depression, that is not what this is!

After four to five years in treatment, 'which just didn't help', she decided to contact the Veterans Institute for help and was eventually diagnosed with PTSD. For her, acknowledging that she was a veteran meant acknowledging that she had PTSD and vice versa.

I could not hide it anymore. (...) It was really my coming out.

The 'it' she could not hide anymore, referred to both her mental health issues and being a veteran. When I met her she was being treated for PTSD in a mental health facility that was part of the Veterans Health Care System. Her identifying as a veteran helped lead to the diagnosis of PTSD, and treatment for this, in turn, stimulated her identification as veteran.

Stefanie went back to Srebrenica in 2017 with former buddies and her mother under the guidance of the NGO Pax Christi. There they saw with their own eyes that the 'birds were singing again' in Srebrenica, that people 'had picked up their lives'. Stefanie felt the trip helped her a little bit in coping with her painful memories. The group also talked with the Mothers of Srebrenica.²¹

They are still upset, very upset with us. So, we tried to get across to them that ... we came with our best intentions — and that we did everything we could. And we told them about the soup, that we made that for them, and then they said: 'well, we did not get any!' And we were like: 'Okay... but... uh... yeah...' And that is how the conversation went.

Again, she emphasised that her intention had been to help, combined with a frustration that this intention had not come across to everyone involved.

21 An association of the relatives of the deceased Muslim men.

By the time I met her, Stefanie had joined The Veterans Search Team²² (VST), where she had found a meaningful way to contribute to society. She said:

I am of value again. (...) I belong somewhere. (...) When someone you know goes missing, you want others to search for that person.

She was happy she could help others in this manner. Also, within the VST she had again found the camaraderie that she had experienced while being in the army. She described this as a special feeling that she has never found in society. This sense of companionship arose multiple times in our conversation. When I asked her what that feeling entails, she found it hard to explain to me, since I never served in the military.

What it is... It is that feeling that they know! So, that what you don't get, that feeling, they do know, yes.

YR: That togetherness again.

Stefanie: Yes, that you are always there for each other and you can always rely on each other. And even when you are strangers, as is indeed the case with the Veterans Search Team — they are all people I have never met before. They have been on missions from Lebanon to Afghanistan — and still, there [at the VST] you just form a unity again. Yes, yes ... 'Where have you been?' 'I've been there and there.' You learn that about each other and then you continue [with the search for the missing person].

Stefanie mentioned both the VST and her current treatment facility as places where she felt at home. Multiple aspects that emerged in most interviews with Srebrenica veterans are evident in her narrative. First, there is the element of helping others, which came up in virtually all conversations I had with Srebrenica veterans. Indeed, the idea of the veteran as a person who wants to help others was one of the most dominant images that emerged from my fieldwork, although some respondents highlighted how some veterans claimed that they helped others when in fact they did nothing. The veteran as a person with mental health issues, as Stefanie explicated, was another frequently occurring image, as was the feeling of mutual connection between veterans: the veteran

22 The Veterans Search Team is a private initiative, founded by an Uruzgan veteran and his wife. All veterans can join this group. The purpose is to search for missing persons, using strategies the veterans learned when in the military, for instance being alert to details and knowing how to avoid erasing possible traces while searching. Since its foundation in 2018, the VST has grown rapidly and is now frequently contacted by the police to assist in their searches.

as loyal buddy. This image was only brought up, however, by those who identified as a veteran. Also prominent in the interviews with Srebrenica veterans was the veteran as a person with certain life experiences.

As with the Lebanon veterans, the various images were not mutually exclusive: there was much overlapping, with several images often arising in a single narrative. For instance, in Stefanie's story she emphasised the image of the veteran as a helper but also mentioned that they were people who had had unusual experiences. She did this when, for example, she looked back at her younger self as naive, implying that the deployment, and particularly her reflections about the deployment years later, gave her life experience and knowledge.

In short, the different representations of veteran that arose in the interviews with Srebrenica veterans were: the helper (1a); those who claimed to be helpers (1b); the injured person (2); the loyal buddy (3); and one who had had a formative life experience (4). In the following sections, I elaborate on these images and demonstrate how they occurred in respondents' stories about the periods before and during deployment, as well as in their descriptions of entering the veteran world, often many years after the actual deployment. I also discuss the consequences that promulgating and identifying with these images had for veterans.

The helper

A broadly shared image of a veteran, among Srebrenica veterans, was someone who was an ex-serviceman who had done something for others. Helping others was central in their descriptions of their expectations before deployment; in how they chose to act in their daily lives; in their descriptions of their personal characteristics; and in the work choices they made, such as undertaking volunteer work. In such ways, Srebrenica veterans emphasised that a veteran was generally a person who wants to do good.

This ethic was not so evident when Srebrenica veterans described their motivations for joining the armed forces, which, on the whole, were similar to Stefanie's: adventure and stability. While these may seem to be contradicting values, they were often mentioned together as being the best of both worlds: being outside and traveling the world, while simultaneously having a job with a decent income. While Srebrenica veterans also mentioned physical challenge as a motive for joining the armed forces, 'doing something good' or 'helping others' was rarely mentioned.

Helping others was more explicit in narratives when respondents were talking about their expectations regarding the deployment to Srebrenica. As Stefanie said, her 'ultimate goal [was] to help others'. The expectation of being able 'to help and do good' while being on deployment was mentioned especially by those who were relatively young (< 22 years old) and lower in rank when deployed. The veterans who were older or held a higher rank tended to describe the deployment as part of the job, something that

had to be done; or the ultimate chance to show what you were made of. Marcel, 27 and Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO) at the time of deployment, described this difference in mentality as follows:

I was a little older. Already, I had some experience, so I had been in service long enough to know how it works. The stories they told you — I knew that you should take those with a grain of salt, as it indeed turned out. But all those younger guys — I was squad leader, I was in command of 15 men aged between 17 and 21 and all of them were like ‘oh yeah, here we go, let’s improve the world’.

The disillusionment these younger men and women experienced during deployment is evident in Marcel’s words, as is his perception that more senior officers were less disillusioned because they already knew ‘how the UN is put together’. Indeed, the younger Srebrenica veterans often described the striking difference in their expectations of the mission and the harsh reality they actually experienced. When looking back on the mission, they described a certain frustration — they had wanted to go there to do good and to help people but the reality on the ground had been that they had felt powerless.

The harshness of this reality was reflected in the negative memories they described of their deployment. A story that came up often was set at the local garbage dump: When Dutchbat brought their waste to the dump, locals would dive into it, looking for edible objects or items to keep themselves warm with. What Dutchbat threw away had low nutritional value, as Dutchbat soldiers themselves were already consuming food past the expiration date. Respondents who had witnessed this scene described the powerlessness they had felt, standing by in their UN uniforms, their weapon in their hands, unable to help the people desperately fighting over their leftovers. That sense of powerlessness was also raised in relation to the mission objectives, as they had little success in controlling, let alone disarming, the local factions. Instead, Dutchbat itself was sometimes disarmed by these factions. This had been intensely frustrating for the veterans, as they had been unable to have a positive impact on the situation.

Years after their return, most Srebrenica veterans in this study became active veterans at some point in their lives, for example by giving lectures about their experiences or by attending a veterans day. Again, being there for or helping others were central when veterans spoke about what caused them to become active veterans. Marcel, for instance, went to a local veterans day because he did not want to disappoint the mayor, a friend of his, who had personally invited him. The event turned out to be so much fun, ‘a feast of recognition’, as he put it, that he stayed until the end and later joined the organising committee.

Another veteran, former corporal Ruud, described how he decided to participate in a documentary about four generations of veterans. He said:

I thought, well, that is a positive contribution to something, for others, maybe people like you, who are interested in this.

The director of the documentary wanted to film him in a veterans' café. Ruud described how he went to look at the place and 'was welcomed there by a warm family of veterans'. Thereafter, he 'never left this veteran family' and slowly became more and more active in organising veteran events. He said:

So that is where me being a veteran actually started.

Helping others was also given as a reason for staying active as a veteran, as was evident in Stefanie's reasons for joining VST: to be useful, and to help others who are in need because a person they care for has gone missing. Another respondent, former corporal Esther voiced the same sentiment when she described the presence of veterans at a World War II remembrance day, and saw how they were appreciated by the local community.

So that's when I thought 'Okay, I can mean something for society as a veteran, if only by just standing there on the fourth of May'.

This feeling of 'helping society' motivated her to continue her involvement with the local commemoration in her role as veteran.

All in all, identifying as a veteran helper had positive impacts on veterans' self-esteem, generating a sense of contributing to something bigger than the individual; in other words, finding meaning in life. Even though the Srebrenica veterans in this study had not been able to achieve their goals in terms of helping the local population, they nevertheless did what they could to 'make the best out of a shitty situation'. The general criticism and scapegoating in the media that followed the deployment offended them, but also caused the veterans identifying as helpers to re-evaluate, in detail, what they had done and why. Reflecting on this, part of the conclusion reached was that they could not have done anything differently or better in the circumstances: they had done their best to try to help.

The sanctimonious

The image of the veteran as a helper also had a dark side: a couple of my respondents talked about how they saw 'the veteran' mainly as a person who claimed to altruistically

help others, while, in reality, they were not involved in active helping. These respondents were Srebrenica veterans who did not feel much affinity with the veteran label, and so distanced themselves from it. They were not talking about Srebrenica veteran specifically, but about veterans in general. For example, according to former NCO Emiel,

There are groups that can call themselves veterans who have been through absolutely nothing and behaved like scumbags.

He compared his first deployment in Dutchbat I with a second one in the Stabilization Force (SFOR) in Bosnia and stated that those two were very different when it came to threat level and action. He said he could see why people who took part in Dutchbat in Srebrenica deserve the veteran status, but he did not view SFOR as the kind of mission deserving that status, as circumstances during that mission were not that severe.

Others told me stories of veteran groups fighting each other about who was more special. Some mentioned that veterans who march at the front of the parade on Veterans Day tended to be those who had not functioned properly during the mission. The types of veterans who mentioned these sorts of things tended to be the ones who distanced themselves from the label of veteran. This image of the veteran, which I define as 'the sanctimonious' is one of the images that appeared in narratives of the interviewed veterans that did not identify with the label of veteran. This is not to say that these informants thought all active veterans were sanctimonious. As former officer Jacco bluntly put it:

What do I think of veterans? Well, one I find a prick and the other I find a hero. Do you want to hear that? Yeah, well, it is like that.

When these more disaffected Srebrenica veterans talked about whether or not they identified as a veteran, they used phrases such as 'what good will that do me?' and 'that is of no use for me'. However, not identifying as a veteran — while simultaneously framing the veteran as a fake helper — nevertheless seemed to be of use to their self-esteem. By portraying other veterans as 'old men fighting each other' or 'the biggest stinkers who walk up front during parades' and at the same time declaring themselves as not part of that group, they came out as the better person.

The injured

A representation as strong as that of the veteran as a helper was the veteran as a person with mental health issues. This association between veterans and psychological problems was made either explicitly or implicitly. As was evident in Stefanie's story, identifying as a veteran and identifying with PTSD went hand in hand. The minute she acknowledged she had PTSD, she had to acknowledge that she was a veteran since both were

unmistakably interrelated. She described this acknowledgement as her 'coming-out', when she admitted to herself and showed the world that she was a veteran with PTSD. Esther, on the other hand, made the connection between being a veteran and mental health struggles more implicitly. She identified as a veteran because of the similarities she shared with other veterans, for example certain character traits such as decisiveness and honesty. However, she seemed to feel this bond especially with veterans who, like her, had mental health issues. Virtually all Srebrenica veterans in this study who suffered from psychological problems identified as a veteran. The problems have affected their lives to the extent that their view of self had been negatively and irrevocably altered. Identifying as a veteran was, for most, a way of finding a new, more positive perception of self.

For the Srebrenica veterans with mental health problems, life circumstances that are a consequence of the problems seemed to make identification as a veteran more relevant. For instance, veterans with severe problems may not be able to work, which leaves them with time to visit veteran cafés, where the veteran identity is, of course, very relevant. Mental healthcare facilities where veterans with problems are in treatment are also contexts in which identifying as a veteran matters. All the Srebrenica veterans in treatment when I interviewed them were attending a facility that is part of the National Health Care System for Veterans. Some followed group treatment with fellow veterans. While initially identifying as a veteran determined the choice of this specific mental healthcare establishment, during the treatment identification as veteran was confirmed and nurtured. Stefanie, for example, mentioned that her mental health facility was a place where she had found what she had lost: a connection with others; a place that feels like home. She had found what she had been missing in the years after she left the military. In this way, being injured led to veteran-focused contexts which, in turn, further stimulated identification as veteran. Veterans who did not experience mental health struggles also did not experience this veteran-focused context.

Even the Srebrenica veterans who had not experienced mental health issues frequently mentioned these issues when talking about contact with other veterans. An example is former officer Casper, who answered the question about what it means for him to be a veteran in the following terms:

Well, it is something you are. One is a veteran.

He then talked about the annual reunion he goes to, where he meets his former soldiers:

There are always some people with post-traumatic stress disorder, who wear the commemorative badge for the wounded. Especially those persons approach you, they want to talk to you.

He went on to tell me how part of his group also went on deployment to Iraq and Afghanistan. I asked him whether he saw a difference between men who had gone on only one deployment and men who had gone on multiple ones. I had differences in mentality or attitudes towards the military in mind, but Casper responded:

I think if you have been on three missions that it has a huge impact on your head, your mind. Yeah, it is a big deal. (...) We have been trained for it (...), we have been well educated, but it has an impact anyway.

For Casper, not experiencing issues himself meant that he did not identify as a veteran. Indeed, just as among Lebanon veterans, among Srebrenica veterans a consequence of the perception of the veteran as an injured person was that those who had not been injured because of the deployment identified less with being a veteran. The absence of deployment-related mental health struggles made it easier for them to move on and to focus on other aspects of their lives.

For those who had suffered or were still suffering from mental health problems, identifying as veteran was inextricably linked to their healing or, if that was not possible in the cases of chronic PTSD, to moving on in some way with their lives. It provided an explanation for why they had been struggling over the years: they could finally understand what had been bothering them and the kind of injury they were suffering from. A good example is Stefanie, who finally discovered that it had not been depression bothering her all those years, but PTSD. Furthermore, identifying as a veteran strengthened the connection to other veterans, and this relieved feelings of loneliness. Finally, participating in veteran activities made many veterans feel useful again, and helped them to find meaning in their lives.

The loyal buddy

The veteran as a loyal buddy, a portrayal also found among Lebanon veterans, as I have shown, was most evident when Srebrenica veterans talked about the positive aspects of the mission. They described it as an inexplicable bond — as being there for each other no matter what. This feeling came up several times in Stefanie's narrative, with her saying she was unable to explain it to me as I was a civilian. This strong sense of camaraderie was viewed by all my respondents as the highlight of the deployment. For example, they shared anecdotes about how they as a group made the best out of the situation they

found themselves in. They joked with each other, laboured and sweated together, and were there for each other when someone was stressed or sad.

Those who raised the image of the veteran as a loyal buddy also spoke about themselves as loyal buddies. For instance, Esther described how she started to do sports again after a former buddy asked her to join training for Invictus Games. It was the sense of being loyal buddies together that brought her to the training:

I now do sports three times a week at the MRC, the [military] rehabilitation centre, where I row on the machine and do archery once a week (...). He [her former buddy] thinks: 'Oh that's something for Esther.' Then he says: 'Hey, go to the Invictus²³ open thingy.' So, I went to this open house and, in the beginning, I felt a lot of stress about it, because there is a lot going on at the same time, and it is difficult for me to deal with external stimuli. But the last time, last Thursday, it actually went well. I also find peace in archery, focusing on yourself, not paying too much attention to your surroundings.

It is clear from this excerpt that the image of the veteran as loyal buddy influenced how Esther chose to spend her spare time. This choice also functioned as a way of helping her to heal. Her loss of energy, a result of PTSD, had caused her to stop her earlier sporting activities, and picking them up again was a first step in the right direction for her. Later in our conversation Esther talked about how she was starting to 'feel at ease' again because of the Invictus environment. She said she felt accepted by the other people there, 'much more than in society'. In broader society, she said she felt as though 'she should defend herself', but among the Invictus sports groups of veterans, this was not the case. Identifying with the notion of the veteran as a loyal buddy therefore helped Esther to cope with her problems.

As Stefanie stressed, and as is evident in Esther's narrative, identifying as a loyal buddy meant 'belonging somewhere'. During the interviews, I always asked the respondent what was of greatest importance in their lives at the moment. In general, the response was their family and health. Six Srebrenica veterans mentioned veteran activities as important, such as being active in veteran unions or veteran sports events. They mentioned being with other veterans, veteran healthcare units, or the area of deployment as the places where they felt most at home. For veterans with mental health issues, this sense of belonging was a way of overcoming social isolation and was a first step along the path to healing. For those who did not have health problems, being with other veterans was simply fun. Either way, this sense of belonging brought joy to the

23 The Invictus Games is a sports tournament organised specifically for physically or mentally wounded veterans.

lives of the Srebrenica veterans. They described it as something very positive and warm in their lives — a connection and sense of belonging that could not be found in society.

The experienced

Another image that arose in the interviews with Srebrenica veterans was that of the veteran as a person who had undergone certain life experiences. This was seen as a given following deployment experience. Instead of viewing the deployment as an attempt to do a good deed — as I analysed in the section ‘The Helper’ — the deployment was seen as a fact of life, something that had to be done, without any sense of altruism or moral validation. Most Srebrenica veterans who mentioned this image said that they felt they had grown or learned something from deployment. They saw deployment as a valuable life lesson and portrayed the experience as being highly significant for personal development and for shaping their world view.

For most Srebrenica veterans, the deployment was the most important life experience they had had, either in a positive or a negative way, or both. Even those who went on deployment with — as they put it — realistic expectations, described some point at which they were shocked by the reality on the ground. The causes of these shocks ranged from witnessing hardship among the local population to the realisation that the mandate and circumstances of the mission were putting them, as soldiers, in danger — most felt ‘locked up’ in a valley surrounded and infiltrated by much better armed groups. Several respondents said that these shocks changed the way they looked at the world and that the mission changed them as a person — for example, that it made them become more decisive and sincere — and therefore, influenced the course of the rest of their lives.

The Srebrenica veterans I spoke to who identified with the work they were currently doing tended to view the deployment as a valuable life lesson that had set them on their career path. Former corporal Nico, for example, described how a rejection caused him to think what it was he wanted in life and to go after that. As a result he found his dream job in the healthcare sector. Some described how deployment-related stigma caused recruiters not to select them for certain jobs, which eventually led them to looking for other options, and resulted in them finding work that suited them better.

To summarise, Srebrenica veterans in this study either found self-value in helping others and viewing themselves as helpers, or else they regarded veterans as sanctionious and avoided the association. Identifying oneself as an injured veteran was perceived by many as the first step towards healing, and acting as a loyal buddy also helped individuals to heal or to help others to heal. Lastly, the portrayal of a veteran as someone who had undergone the kind of life experience that shaped the course of the rest of their life was key to several respondents’ perceptions of self. These perceptions were all interrelated: the helper could become the wounded because of frustration and

disillusionment, just as the loyal buddy was also a helper to his comrades — especially those who were injured or suffering. All my respondents described how identifying as a Srebrenica veteran had a positive influence on their self-esteem, either because it enabled them to be of help to others, or because it helped them to start on a healing path, or merely because it gave them a sense of belonging and enabled them to recognise how they had grown as a result of deployment experience.

3.3 URUZGAN VETERANS: THE MILITARY ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE DEDICATED SOLDIER

Uruzgan veteran Erik received me in his home, and offered me coffee and pie. On the wall there was a picture of him with his wife and kids. He talked thoughtfully and calmly about his life before, during, and after military service.

Erik joined the military because of the ‘physical aspects’ and his need for structure. He joined the Engineers Corps. In response to a question about whether the reality of being in the military had lived up to his expectations, he said that he had never thought about that before. He said he had a ‘fantastic time’ in the military, but that both of his deployments also marked governmental cutbacks that he said impacted drastically on the military and therefore were a reality check as well, ‘that maybe it was not as great as I had imagined’.

When Erik talked about his deployment, the following aspects stood out: his own performance, the performance of his unit, and the relationships between the members of the unit.

You tend to forget the negative things and hold on to the beautiful ones. I think I romanticise it a bit now, the deployment. I have known actual fear there, I am aware of that, but I had a lot of fun as well, the camaraderie with the guys. Because we, the engineers, were always together as a group, we created such a close crew, that band of brothers every veteran talks about, that is what I had and that is typical of the deployment.

When Erik returned to the Netherlands, he experienced a difference in the way he viewed himself and how he was viewed by others.

To put it simply, I felt like the alpha dog — but others looked at me and asked: ‘Why are you so full of yourself? You have been to wherever and who cares what you have done there. Life has continued here, so return to who you were and stop acting silly’.

Erik soon realised that the Netherlands ‘was not America’ where, in his perception, deployed soldiers are held in high regard. He decided to stop talking about his experiences with regular civilians and to reminisce only when in the company of his former buddies.

After his two deployments, Erik tried to become a NCO, but had struggled to get a place at the Royal Military School. He had had to pull some strings before he was finally accepted as a student. He then thought to himself: ‘Do I actually want this if it costs me this much to just get in?’ By then he had also married and was planning to start a family. He wanted to be a present father, something deployments and transfers to military bases all over the country would hinder. These circumstances made him decide to leave the service.

Soon after, he was admitted to the civil police force training programme. The transition from army to police was not always easy. He described the shift from what he calls the ‘green blood’ — meaning the straightforward can-do mentality of the army — to the ‘blue blood’ of the police, where there was a culture of:

Talking, talking, talking. ‘Shall we go left? We can also go right’ — and then talk, talk, talk to go straight ahead in the end.

He described how he became close friends with a fellow student who had also been in the army. They got talking after Erik used an expression common in the military.

He reacted immediately [to this military expression] and then you start the conversation of ‘where have you been’ and that is how it started. Nowadays, fortunately, he left that feeling behind, but back then, he was like: ‘Oh, why did you leave [the military], I regret it so much.’

Erik mentioned other colleagues in the police force with ‘green blood running in their veins’, referring to their past in the army. The mutual connection he felt arose from what he called a ‘no nonsense mind set’ and the use of certain expressions. He said to have mingled the ‘green blood’ with ‘blue blood’ — the blood type of the police. He said that being a veteran was useful for being in the police force, especially when it came to dealing with other veterans, including those causing trouble.

When talking about the influence deployment had on him, he said it was a fantastic experience that had made him the person he was now.

I think I have become very down to earth, even more so than before deployment. (...) I am proud of what I have done. I would not do without it for the world, absolutely not.

He said he felt he was stronger than before, in the sense that he appreciated his life in the Netherlands more than before, since now he knew 'there are loads of people way worse off'. This also impacted on how he was bringing up his children. He told me how having seen children living in real poverty was still motivating him to teach his children gratitude for all the possibilities in their lives.

Erik also said that he never thought about whether or not his deployment contributed to a greater purpose, such as establishing democracy in Afghanistan. For him, the deployment was a valuable life experience that had no greater objective other than to improve his military performance and that of his unit. He and his former buddies get together once a year and:

[We share] though stories with a jar of beer. (...) We always say: 'With these guys we can do the same thing all over again.' Now that you have kids you think about it differently, but this is about how well it went there. (...) I think we delivered a hell of a job concerning the thing that was expected from us.

Erik said he felt proud to be a veteran. He was proud of what he had done and how he had handled things during his deployment. However, he chose to keep this to himself.

Being a veteran currently entails for me: being proud of myself, proud of what I have done, but for the outside world it does not mean much, since it is not appreciated much in the Netherlands.

He thought that the Dutch public does not have a complete picture of what it means to be a veteran. According to Erik, veterans are generally associated with problems and with old age. He himself used to think of veterans as being old men, but his view changed as he gradually came to realise that he and his peers are also veterans. This only became clear to him when he left the service. However, a visit to a local veteran café also underscored the image of the veteran as an old man.

I walked in and there were a few of those old geezers, very cosy, but I found no connection. Those men were all retired, they were happy that some fresh blood was coming in, I understand that, they were immediately saying: 'See if you want to join us as a volunteer to keep things

going, because we all are getting old.' Then I donated some things from the Afghanistan deployment to them for the showcases, stuff they didn't have yet. It was fine, but I did not feel the need to go there more often.

Erik's story was representative of most of the Uruzgan veterans in this study: their motives for enlisting; their memories of deployment; and the experience of returning to a society that was ignorant of or indifferent to their experiences. Identifying with the military was more important than feeling like a veteran in most cases. Indeed, most of the Uruzgan veterans I interviewed were not very active as veterans. They might attend company reunions, or be in contact with some former buddies, but they rarely joined official veteran events such as Veterans Day in the Hague or even in their own locality. Some visited veteran cafés to share deployment stories and feel the camaraderie again.

On the whole, Uruzgan veterans associated being a veteran with being a professional, dedicated soldier (1a) — although identifying as a professional soldier sometimes lead to viewing other veterans who had experienced less threatening events as unworthy (1b); being an old man (2); and being a loyal buddy (3). Again, the associations were not mutually exclusive, as I demonstrate below. In the following sections, I will explicate the images derived from the narratives and what (not) identifying as a veteran brings the Uruzgan veterans. The images and the way veterans position themselves towards these, are abstracted from what the Uruzgan veterans narrate about the period before and during deployment and home coming, the role their deployment has in their narrative, their view on the veteran world, and the context in which their identification matters.

The dedicated soldier

The most dominant image the Uruzgan veterans I spoke to had of 'the veteran' was that of the military professional who has performed well: the dedicated soldier. The paradox here was that they simultaneously linked it to being a veteran, although it often stopped them identifying as one, as I explain in the following paragraphs. Although identifying as a veteran is always linked to identifying with the military — indeed, one cannot be a veteran if one is not an ex-serviceman — among Uruzgan veterans, identifying with the military was more relevant than identifying as a veteran. In other words, the fact that they were a military serviceman in the past appeared to matter more to them than being a veteran in the present. Some even described how their military identity kept them from identifying as a veteran, since viewing themselves as veterans would imply acknowledging that they were no longer part of the military. For some, this meant identifying with the military in general, for others, with the military department to which they had belonged — for example, Erik reminisced about the close bond he still had with the Engineering Corps. This applied to other informants as well: obtaining the red beret for being a soldier in the Airmobile Brigade, or being a former marine, meant more

to them than being a veteran. At the same time, when talking about what it meant to be a veteran, Uruzgan veterans referred to military achievements and described they had performed their military tasks well.

This ideal of a dedicated soldier cropped up in many informants' life stories when talking about motives for choosing military service. They had not seen themselves as the type to 'sit still in classrooms' or to feel satisfied with a regular 9 to 5 job. They had desired physical challenges, action, and adventure. Indeed, enduring the challenges of military training played an important role in their identification processes, and they felt a close connection to those who had undergone similar training, such as other marines or red berets. They often viewed the completion of their training as a greater achievement than a deployment. Consider the words of former corporal Bart, who had left the service five years before our interview but still talked about 'being a Marine' in the present tense.

From day one in the training, it is banged into your head: you are a marine and eh... I think it gets rubbed in even more than in other units because, well, a lot of people drop out during the training, so that leaves the impression you are formed in a good way — because the training is one of the tougher ones. And you bond with the guys you complete it with. (...)
I feel more like a Marine than a veteran. I feel prouder for being a Marine.

When describing the time prior to the mission, comments such as the following were common: 'we knew what we were going to do there' and 'I was looking forward to being able to do in real life what I had been training for all this time' — referring to the situation they would encounter in Uruzgan. Those for whom the reality in Uruzgan had been different to what they had been trained for described themselves as having had the flexibility to cope with that. When talking about the events that had made the most impression on them, Uruzgan veterans tended to highlight ones that reflected their own performance. They were proud of how they had handled a challenging situation and how they had acted as a unit. Former NCO Maarten, for example, described the death of his commander and a fellow soldier from an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) as both the most negative and yet most affirming memory of his deployment: negative because he lost two people he was fond of, yet affirming because he proved to himself that even in this kind of crisis he managed to keep his head and to do what he had been trained to do.

I learned from it, I grew stronger (...) Purely the fact that you get thrown in the most hectic situation and, well, take care of it, doing your thing. At that moment I had to perform beyond my function, had to act right

then and there, yeah, I received some compliments for that from different people afterwards.

In other words, Maarten looked back at himself during deployment as a professional, dedicated soldier.

Even those who had encountered severe violence looked back at deployment with feelings of gratitude and joy. They described it as an intense and exciting period of their lives, about which they had no regrets. They felt deployment had changed their world view, in that, for example, they had come to see, unlike most civilians, how living in the Netherlands was a luxury. They talked about how they felt they had changed, that they were now more capable of putting things into perspective, and now knew what they were made of. However, many also experienced negative changes, such as becoming agitated more easily, or putting too many things into perspective, which can make people close to them feel as though their experiences were not as important as what the veteran had been through. But on the whole they talked about the deployment to Uruzgan as a very valuable experience, of which they were proud.

Virtually all the Uruzgan veterans in this study talked about having problems adapting on their return to the Netherlands. They said that it was hard to get used to civilian life again, and to stop feeling that constant need for vigilance that they had developed during their mission in Uruzgan. It took time to let go of the mindset of being a dedicated soldier 24 hours a day.

Most Uruzgan veterans I interviewed had found a job, but not all identified with it. They described the shift from military to civilian culture as 'really tough'. Most did not talk about their current job in the same passionate manner as they talked about their former job in the military. They missed the action and the straightforwardness and found it hard to adjust to all the talking and sharing of feelings that is done by civilians. Also, they missed the team spirit, the sense of being there for each other, and of being united in working towards the same goal. Although most had found their way in the civilian world, some expressed regret about their decision to leave the armed forces. Robin, a former corporal, said in our interview that he thought he should have tried to find another challenge within the armed forces instead of deciding to leave the service. He was then in the police force, and found it hard to adjust to what he called a 'civilian institute'. As did Erik, he talked about the difference between 'green blood of the army' and 'blue blood of the police', referring to differences in mentality among the employees.

Most of them [other students undertaking police training] ... the worst that ever happened to them is that their goldfish lied on its back in the fishbowl, and yes, well, I had been through worse of course. So that was a culture shock. (...) Soft crowd, the police. [He puts on a squeaky voice] 'Are

you alright? I see you are having a hard time.' And I think to myself: I just want to catch bad guys. (...) It is just talking, talking, talking, no action. While in Defence it was: 'This is what we are going to do!' — 'Okay!' And here, there are always some people who say: 'Yes, well, but...'. It is a civil organisation.

It is clear from this excerpt that Robin perceived military culture to be better than civil culture. He had chosen the military because the organisation appealed to his inner values, which he had had since his youth, and because several family members had been active in the military. These values were strengthened by the years he spent in the military, and the transition to civilian life did not mean he let go of them. It is clear from these examples that identifying with the military was very important, especially when they were now working with civilians who did not have a military past.

This identification with the military past, whether my informants liked it or not, influenced their role at home as a spouse and especially as a parent. Virtually all Uruzgan veterans I spoke to were in a relationship and the majority had young children. Their identification as a parent was often linked to them identifying as an ex-serviceman. For example, many said that having children was the key reason for them leaving the service. They also described how their parenting had partially evolved out of their military experience, for example having a lack of patience with their kids whining, since they have seen kids so much worse off, as Erik mentioned.

Even with those veterans who said that their military service had been 'just a job', their military identity was visible. Vincent, for example, had a picture of his daughter, who had joined the navy, shaking hands with the Minister of Defence, and Joyce, who said she was glad that her time at the military was behind her, had her military awards hanging on the kitchen wall. For most Uruzgan veterans, the military was still present in their private lives.

Identifying with the military was important among themselves, too, for example when they shared stories about their military performance and wanted to show that they were proud of what they had done. They also compared experiences in terms of threat and combat exposure. Identifying as a former soldier was also of importance in other, more quotidian contexts, in the sense that it marked a difference between veterans and civilians, although civilians might not be aware of this. Among civilians, most Uruzgan veterans experienced a mutual misunderstanding and a different mindset.

Identifying as former servicemen enabled veterans to feel proud about their former job. It also brought them into contact with other former servicemen, with whom they bonded more easily than with civilians, especially if they were of similar ages. However, another effect was the continuation of a certain alienation from civilians. In this way,

identifying as a veteran was strongly related to their military past, in which the deployment was the crown and the military training the foundation.

The toy soldier

In the responses of some of the Uruzgan veterans, the notion of a well-performing soldier was a reason *not* to identify as a veteran. This was fostered by the perception that the veterans who were most active as veterans had not faced the same threat as the Uruzgan veterans who went off base had. The broad (state) definition of a veteran therefore lowered the prestige of what it meant to be veteran and was not compatible with the self-image Uruzgan veterans held. For instance, they perceived someone who had gone on deployment to the Sinai desert as not equal to someone who had gone to Uruzgan. And a soldier in a fighting unit in Uruzgan was not comparable to a soldier who merely had a function inside the base camp. Exposure to physical threat was crucial in this hierarchy. The veterans who had been more exposed thought of themselves as having performed outstandingly, and viewed other veterans as exaggerating their involvement in combat. Their self-image was therefore a more combat-related version of the dedicated soldier, while the image of 'the veteran' implied here, is someone who pretends to be a real warrior.

Uruzgan veterans illustrated this image of 'the veteran', what I define as 'toy soldier', by describing encounters with veterans who presented themselves as veterans. They called them 'attention seekers' who exaggerated their experiences. Consider the following quote of Bart:

I don't see myself walking around with a beret on a day like that [the Netherlands Veterans Day], that is not necessary for me. (...) Sometimes I think to myself — with all due respect but — they make it worse than it is. (...) I know a few, they were in the navy and they had a deployment to the Sisinaï [sic] or something, to Egypt in the desert. Nothing happened there. They had to bore wells there and now they act as if they... have been through all kinds of things, then I think to myself: Eh... are you a veteran?

Also consider former corporal Danny, whose first encounter with the veterans' world was with members of a Veterans Motor Club. It caused him to take veterans in general less seriously.

Well, you talk to them and they walk around, dressed in those vests, acting really tough. Then you have to become a prospect [a new member of the Motor Club, lowest in the hierarchy]. First, I was like, well yeah, really nice. (...) And I say 'u' [Dutch formal version of 'you'] to them: 'What did 'u' do?'

- 'Yeah, I was cook in Bosnia.'

I think yeah, that is really nice, terrific, and I do not have anything against it, but there they walk around, acting like the tough veteran — 'Veterans MC' on his back. So I think to myself: Well, he must have killed people with his teeth. And then I say 'u' to him and, if I joined the club, I would have to pour his coffee, you know. (...) I left with my buddies, I said to them: No way we are joining your club.

Danny clearly felt that pouring coffee for someone who had not actually been in combat was beneath him, a former sniper. Earlier in our conversation, he had stated that he did not feel like a veteran. He thought the reason for this was possibly that he was still young, but he also indicated another possibility. He said:

You have veterans and you have veterans. Those buddies of mine, they are not the veterans visiting things and they would not go to The Hague, no way they would go to the Malieveld. You don't run into them there. (...) The guys walking there, when you see the sign 'Uruzgan': they are all fat people (...). Nurses walk around there, [as if to say] look at us, we have been in Uruzgan. Then I think to myself: Well...

Although most veterans emphasised that every function contributed to the overall mission, so everyone was important during deployment, some Uruzgan veterans implied — or make very explicit, as did Danny — that particular functions were more dangerous than others and were therefore more prestigious. He implied that those who acted the toughest during veteran gatherings and events were not necessarily the ones who had run the most risk during deployment. This physical risk was highly valued, post deployment, and reflected veterans' motivations for joining the armed forces in the first place: adventure and physical challenges. This all applies to a self-image of a male warrior, which stands in contrast the veteran as a toy soldier.

The old man

Another reason why the veteran world did not, on the whole, appeal to Uruzgan veterans was the perception they had of the veteran as an old man. In their narratives, two different stories were distinguishable. The first was that of the Uruzgan veteran not identifying as a veteran because of the image he held of the veteran as an old man — while not excluding the option that they will identify as a veteran in the future, when they themselves are old. The second was that they had revised their initial perception of the veteran as an old man and that it now meant someone who had been in the military.

In the first case, the old man was often associated with a certain kind of experience, and of having been through 'more' during World War Two or in the Dutch East Indies than the average 'young' veteran. Consider the following excerpt from an interview with former NCO Kevin:

A veteran is an old man. A really old man. That is a veteran. A veteran of 24 years old is not a veteran. But then you say: what is the definition of veteran? Well, yeah, deeds of war. (...) But that is not the way I see it. (...) Maybe it will change if I am a really old man later on. Who knows!

The second perception reflects a shift in thinking. While still in service, although already a veteran, none of the Uruzgan veterans saw themselves visiting veteran cafés or attending veteran days. They described their perception of a veteran as an old man hanging around on Veterans Day and walking in parades, telling stories about the good old days. However, when they left the service, it dawned on them that they themselves, even in their 20s or 30s, were also veterans. Identifying as a veteran became relevant to them as it symbolised an enduring connection to the military organisation they still held dearly. Erik, for instance, eventually connected the pride he felt for his military past and deployments to being (and becoming) a veteran, instead of viewing veterans as old men.

Another veteran, Michael, told me about how he had gone to a veterans café where he found he could connect with the older veterans.

You tell each other stories. During the stories of the older guys, you can feel a bit intimidated. But then they ask you where you have been. And then, well, let's say, Uruzgan is a good one.

To Michael, being able to talk about Uruzgan legitimated his identification as a veteran as he found that the older veterans respected him. Still, as was also evident in Erik's story, even though the older veterans liked Michael, he did not feel at home among them. Michael mentioned that the presence of a Bosnia veteran and an Iraq veteran, who were both closer to him in age, was the eventual incentive to visit again.

The image of the veteran as an old man appears not compatible with that of a dedicated soldier, as old men are generally not involved in combat. This is the paradox Uruzgan veterans found themselves in: they felt 'too young' to be a veteran, yet were nevertheless still attached to their military past, and felt a connection with fellow veterans while feeling different from regular civilians. This made them hesitate to fully identify as a veteran, while at the same time they did attach meaning to this identification. This dynamic was clearly visible in the stories of the Uruzgan veterans who had

changed their perception of the veteran merely as an old man to include themselves as dedicated soldiers.

The loyal buddy

Uruzgan veterans also associated the meaning of being a veteran with the camaraderie they experienced during military service — especially with the fellow soldiers they went on deployment with. They also felt this connection with veterans they met later in life, for instance, in a civilian context. The notion of the loyal buddy symbolised a shared military background, and the sense of mutual connection was based on sharing customs and values. Whenever the notion of the loyal buddy featured in my respondents' narratives, it was often linked to military culture. Robin and Erik both described it as recognising the 'green blood type' of the army, as opposed to only sharing the 'blue blood type' of the police. This sense of mutual connection provided an opportunity for sharing stories about deployment and military service with other people who had gone through similar experiences. It reflected nostalgia or even regret for leaving the service.

Hence, in the presence of other veterans, this perception of a veteran as a loyal buddy was highly relevant. Besides socialising together, Uruzgan veterans also shared stories about what they had done and learned: the image of the dedicated soldier was never far away. When Uruzgan veterans did not experience this exclusive bond between veterans, they did not identify as a veteran. Those who did not identify as a loyal buddy tended to look back on their time as a soldier in a positive light and remembered the connection they felt to others then. However, having left the service, they did not miss the military way of interacting, and expressed a desire to move on. Instead of looking back to their time in the military as the best time in their life, Uruzgan veterans who did not buy into the notion of veterans being loyal buddies seemed eager to look forward to what would come next.

To summarise, military performance, professionalism, and achievements were dominant in the narratives of the Uruzgan veterans. They viewed themselves as dedicated, professional soldiers and looked back at what they had learned in the military. Because they had left the service relatively recently, the 'reversed culture shock' resulting from the transition to civilian life was still fresh. Identifying with the military often prevailed over identifying as a veteran — although there was a slow and careful shift visible among some respondents who connected the pride they felt in their military performance to the status of being a veteran. Other representations of 'the veteran' that featured in the stories of the Uruzgan veterans were that of the old man and the loyal buddy. These two images both held a relationship to that of the dedicated soldier: the image of old men was not compatible with that of a dedicated, active soldier, while the loyal buddy felt a connection to another buddy because of their shared military past.

3.4 VETERANS FROM A VETERAN'S POINT OF VIEW – DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES

All the veterans I interviewed talked about one or more of their perceptions of what it means to be 'a veteran'. Whether or not they recognised themselves in those perceptions determined if they identified as a veteran. Although there were similarities as well as differences between the three groups of veterans, this process was the same.

Images of veterans: The injured, the helper, and the dedicated soldier

For each veteran group I have highlighted the typical perceptions of the veteran that emerged from respondents' narratives. The image that played a significant role among both Lebanon and Srebrenica veterans was that of the veteran as an injured person. For those suffering from mental health issues, identifying as a veteran was a way of explaining these issues both to themselves and to the general public. Identifying as a veteran also generated social ties to other (suffering) veterans. This echoes what Sørensen (2015) described about Danish veterans in her study, how they developed certain narratives and representations of themselves in response to public attitudes and societal perceptions of their involvement in war, while at the same time using this process of reflection to find meaning in their personal experiences in the military. Sørensen demonstrated how the most visible veterans highlighted the long term consequences of involvement in war, as most of them were suffering from PTSD (p. S235-S238). In my study, the image of 'the veteran' as an injured person was, for the Lebanon veterans in particular, so strong that those who were active and visible as a veteran often still did not identify with being a veteran purely because they were not injured.

Among Srebrenica veterans, a moral element was evident in their portrayals of 'a veteran'. Those who identified with being a veteran often constructed an image of the veteran as being a helper, contributing to the greater good, however abstract that 'greater good' may be. This is comparable to the finding Tomforde (2005) highlighted among German peacekeeping soldiers: the 'helper in uniform'. In her study among veterans deployed to Bosnia between 2003–2004 as part of the Stabilization Force (SFOR), 64% identified with the image of the soldier as helper in uniform, whose tasks were more directed towards peacekeeping than combat (p. 584). My study found that this sense of helping can become so internalised — possibly due to external pressure and public debate — that the sense of being a helper continued after return to civilian life. Srebrenica veterans who identified as helpers therefore continued trying to do good through, for example, volunteer work. They did not particularly view this form of altruism as 'a civilian job', however, as did Dutch peacekeeping soldiers Sion (2006, p. 470–471) described in her study. While the soldiers in Sion's study emphasised that peacekeeping and supporting local people was a civilian job as it involved a lot of socialising and talking, Srebrenica veterans in my study talked about altruism in terms of undertaking

action and being proactive. Most viewed it as an appropriate activity for veterans who had a military mentality of solidarity and of acting in the interests of the collective. In contrast to this, Srebrenica veterans who did not identify as veterans described veterans as people who claim to be altruistic, while in fact they are not.

Uruzgan veterans' ways of identifying were strongly linked to the military. Being an ex-serviceman, or more specifically an ex-marine or an ex-Airmobile soldier, was often of more importance than being a veteran. While some focused on the military tasks they had had to perform, others specified that being in combat and at physical risk was most important. This resonates with Tomforde's notion of the 'male warrior' as 'mainly combat oriented with a strong masculine image' (2005, p. 584). This self-image came to the fore in the narratives of Uruzgan veterans, and this self-image was a reason not to identify as veterans: they felt superior to veterans who had not been in combat. The Uruzgan veterans who, albeit cautiously, did identify as veterans perceived a veteran to be a person who had got the most out of their military self, who had proven they were able to perform under pressure. The focus was not on violence, but on doing the assigned tasks the best they could. This compares to Sørensen (2015, p. S238) definition of the veteran as 'coveted labourer', or someone who reaches his goals by adhering to military values such as willpower, decisiveness, toughness, and calmness. Instead of 'coveted labourer', I think 'dedicated soldier' reflects what the Uruzgan veterans in this study felt, as this includes both the dedication and the military character of these veterans' perceptions of themselves. Furthermore, the ability to apply skills learned in the military to their current jobs was not in evidence in the way that Sørensen described in her study. Instead, my respondents contrasted their military values to those in civilian work culture, stressing how they felt different to civilians because of their military past.

In this process of identity construction, overarching themes are visible which were narrated both by those who identified as a veteran and those who did not. Among Lebanon veterans, this central theme was mental health issues. This theme also occurred among Srebrenica veterans, as well as the theme of moral dignity. Uruzgan veterans constructed their military/veteran identification around the theme of military achievement (see table 3.1).

Table 3.1 Perceptions of a veteran – most common images

	Those who identify as a veteran	Those who do not identify as a veteran	Theme
Lebanon	Veteran as an injured person	Veteran as a person with mental health issues	Mental health issues
Srebrenica	Veteran as helper Veteran as injured person	Veterans as sanctimonious Veteran as person with mental health issues	Moral dignity Mental health issues
Uruzgan	Veteran as dedicated soldier	Veteran as toy soldier	Military achievement

Other veteran images

Other dominant images were that of the loyal buddy (in all three groups), the extraordinary (Lebanon), the experienced (Srebrenica) and the old man (Uruzgan). The image of the veteran as a loyal buddy emerged in all three groups and encompassed the camaraderie felt between soldiers and, after leaving the service, between veterans. This camaraderie created a feeling of belonging and served as a key benefit of identifying as a veteran. It was seen as something that could only be found inside the military or with people who have a military past. The perception of the loyal buddy overlapped, in all three groups, with the other most common perceptions of the veteran. For Lebanon veterans, the loyal buddy helped comrades to cope with their trauma. Srebrenica veterans saw the veteran as a loyal buddy because he was a noble helper to all, especially to other veterans, and in particular to veterans with mental health issues. Uruzgan veterans saw the loyal buddy as being loyal to their former comrades, with whom they had performed military tasks in an excellent manner during deployment (see table 3.2).

Table 3.2 A loyal buddy for whom?

Lebanon	Fellow veterans, to help them cope with their trauma
Srebrenica	All, especially other veterans and in particular veterans with mental health issues
Uruzgan	Former buddies, with whom they went on deployment

The images of the veteran as *extraordinary* (Lebanon), *experienced* (Srebrenica) and a *dedicated soldier* (Uruzgan) have similarities: they all focus on a formative life experience, an accomplishment that civilians do not have. I would argue that by and large all three images represent a similar sentiment, influenced both by time and feelings of pride. For Uruzgan veterans who portray this image, this accomplishment focused on military performance. For Srebrenica veterans who portray this image, it was a formative life experience; and for Lebanon veterans who use this image it was something out of the ordinary. These three images reflect the same sentiment: having done something outstanding. The accents within this sentiment shift as the years between deployment and present accumulate. Namely, the longer ago the deployment took place, the more the time in the military was seen as an extraordinary period in the veteran's life instead of an important way of identifying. The fact that Srebrenica veterans described this image in a more neutral manner, avoiding sentiments of being outstanding, may point to this lower sense of pride. This lower sense of pride also arose in the quantitative data of Core Data Veterans, presented in Chapter Two, where I showed that Lebanon and Uruzgan veterans said more often that they were proud to be a veteran than did UNPROFOR veterans.

Finally, the *old man* was an image that was mainly dominant among Uruzgan veterans who did not identify as old men themselves. This image of an old man did not fit

well with the image of a dedicated soldier, who was perceived to be active, strong, and tough. Nevertheless, these images overlapped in narratives, and changed over time.

Similarities and differences in narratives: Talking about moving on and the role of deployment

Apart from differences and similarities in the constructed images of a veteran, there were other similarities and differences visible in the narratives, and on which I elaborate here. An overarching similarity between the three groups was that veterans who did not feel much affinity towards the label of veteran depicted themselves as 'having moved on', 'not lingering in the past', or, if they had left the service recently, 'looking forward to moving on'. Identifying as a veteran meant constructing an identity based on what one has done in the past instead of what one will do in the future. Why veterans 'linger in the past' can be explained by contextual factors, such as having mental health issues, and on current life circumstances that have resulted from the deployment in the past, and that make it harder to move on and more likely that a person will identify as a veteran. In general, identifying with a new occupation made identifying as a veteran less relevant. It is necessary to ask, however, whether longing for the past is exactly what prevents some veterans from identifying with their current occupation. As the interview excerpts showed, especially those from Uruzgan veterans, military culture was romanticised and was often described in more positive terms than Dutch civilian life. This perception, too, might make it harder to reintegrate as a civilian.

The different roles deployment played in the narratives of the veterans demonstrated the difference between identification as a veteran (for Lebanon and Srebrenica veterans) and identification with the military (Uruzgan veterans). When the Lebanon and Srebrenica veterans described their deployment, the three stages of a rite of passage were evident (Van Gennep, 2013 [1960]; Turner, 2017 [1969]). Van Gennep (2013 [1960]) described these three stages as: a separation stage, a liminal phase, and a reintegration phase. Turner elaborated on the liminal phase: a phase where one is neither separated nor reintegrated, but in-between. In the stories of Lebanon and Srebrenica veterans, the unknowing young soldiers go on deployment and are separated from normal life. When the soldiers return home, they are in the liminal stage as they are not fully a soldier anymore, but, due to the intense experience of being on deployment, they cannot return to their old role as a civilian either. As time goes by, they reintegrate into his old way of life in the Netherlands, with a new sense of self: no longer unknowing or naïve, as they were before deployment, but aware of the harsh realities in the world. For some veterans, this reintegration is not successful: they continue to feel in-between — no longer on deployment, but not completely reintegrated into society either — because of mental health struggles, obstacles to finding a new job, or a continuing sense of alienation from civilians. Either way, Lebanon and Srebrenica veterans in my study described deployment

as a disruption of their world view, as their expectations did not meet the reality on the ground. This disruption separated them from who they were before and urged them to find a new sense of self in order to reintegrate successfully after their return home.

When looking at the Uruzgan veterans in this study, it is clear that they describe themselves prior to deployment as knowing very well what they were facing. They were already aware of the dangers before deployment, which made the deployment much less meaningful for their self-image. In their stories, they emphasised military training as a rite of passage for soldiers (see also Ambaum & Vermetten, 2019; Molendijk, 2020; Soeters, 2018b). Other studies have emphasised the importance of military training in creating a mutual bond among the soldiers (Binks & Cambridge, 2018; Christensen, et al., 2018; Demers, 2011; Elder & Clipp, 1988; Molendijk, 2020; Mouthaan, Euwema, & Weerts, 2005; Sion, 2006; Smith & True, 2014; Soeters, Winslow, & Weibull, 2006; Soeters, 2018a; Wilson, 2008), as well as in developing a conviction that one is able to overcome obstacles (Hale, 2008) and to identify with the military (Cooper et al., 2018, p. 158). During training, Uruzgan veterans were separated from their civilian peers. They bonded with others during the training, which functioned as a liminal phase. Deployment then functioned as the reintegration phase, during which the soldiers integrated what they learned in training in their actions. Eventually, most Uruzgan veterans felt able to do what they were trained for on deployment. The deployment to Uruzgan then served as a confirmation of their identity as a soldier. In the narratives of Lebanon and Srebrenica veterans, however, generally speaking the deployment changed their perceptions of self and world view. In their stories, these changes impacted their ways of identifying in the present. In the narratives of Uruzgan veterans, the deployment mostly served as a confirmation of their self-image and world view and strengthened their identification as a soldier.

There are several explanations for this difference in the narratives. First is the time that had passed since military service. For most Uruzgan veterans, the moment they left the service was simply closer to the present than for most Srebrenica and Lebanon veterans. They still struggle with finding a place in the civilian world that fully suits them. This also explains why their identification with the military still prevailed over their identification as veteran. Another explanation is the military context of the Uruzgan mission: it was a professionalized military mission without conscripts, and comprised soldiers who experienced multiple instead of a single deployment. Therefore, the deployment is a less disruptive event, if only because it is not a unique event.

However, a couple of scholars (Broesder, 2011; Sion, 2006) have pointed to a third explanation, namely the nature of the mission: peace enforcement versus peace keeping. Uruzgan veterans had indeed much more opportunity to experience the adventure and action they looked for when entering the military, to do 'what they were trained for' — to exercise the role of male warrior — a role not available to the veterans in the

other two missions to the same extent. Expectations versus the reality of the mission can indeed cause tensions in identification processes, especially if expectations include the self-image of a masculine warrior type, and activities turn out to be solely peacekeeping, as these previous studies have shown (Broesder, 2011; Sion, 2006). However, most Lebanon and Srebrenica veterans in this study described the gap between expectations and reality the other way around: they had expected a calm environment but encountered a hostile one, in which there 'was not much peace to keep' (see also Driessen, 2021). Either way, it appears that discovering what the deployment was actually about during deployment itself influenced the role the deployment later played in the veteran's narrative and impacted on how they identified (or not) as a veteran.

To summarise, when looking for an explanation for the differences in the perceptions of what a veteran is that arose in the interviews, I found that they were both mission and time specific. As I show in the following chapters, perceptions of what it means to be a veteran are influenced by public debate around particular missions. In the next chapter I elaborate on how the veterans of the three missions perceived public opinion on the military, their mission, and veterans in general.





4

Violence and victimhood: How veterans perceive and react to societal views

As we saw in the theoretical outline, identification is influenced by outsiders. How others view the identifier and what associations others develop regarding a particular group matters when potential members choose whether, how, and when to identify as group member. The way the group is viewed by others has consequences for how its members are treated (Jenkins, 2014a, 2014b). Also, the reaction of others to one's narrative influences the way a life story develops. If others reject the story because of incoherence, this can lead to the story teller feeling ashamed (Giddens, 1991). And if listeners agree with the story, the story can become an important part of the way the story teller identifies and support their worldview (McAdams & McLean, 2013). In this chapter, I will therefore zoom in on what veterans have told me about their perceptions of how others view them.

In the data, I distinguished four topics in which veterans reflect on the opinions of others. First, the veterans described mission specific stereotypes they confronted. Second, they talked about the general view in society of the military profession and of veterans. Third, they reflected on how society views veterans in general. Fourth, the veterans described how these views of others influence their behaviour and self-perception. I will start with summarising the findings on these four topics among Lebanon veterans, followed by Srebrenica and Uruzgan veterans. The chapter will end by highlighting the similarities and differences with references to the literature about this subject.

4.1 LEBANON VETERANS: SUNNY BEACH, GROWING INTEREST AND THE LIKES OF WAR

In this section, I describe how the Lebanon veterans whom I interviewed reflected on opinions of the general public regarding the military occupation and veterans in general, and their mission in particular. I start with how they felt to be viewed when they returned from their deployment to the Netherlands about four decades ago, followed by their impression of how the public views the military and veterans. Then, I turn to the specific stereotype they mention of the ill veteran receiving compensation and the sensitivities that become visible in their narratives when talking with others about violence and war. Further, I describe how the Lebanon veterans, in turn, reacted to the perceived public opinion. The section ends with a summary.

'Holiday-makers'

Shortly upon their return to the Netherlands, Lebanon veterans were confronted with prejudices about their mission, reflected by reactions such as: 'How was your holiday? Did you enjoy lying on the beach?' They noticed that people had their minds made up when it came to UNIFIL and that those people had no conception of and no interest in

what the mission actually entailed. The perceived level of public interest and the felt need of Lebanon veterans to talk about their experiences did not match. Therefore, some Lebanon veterans stopped talking about their experiences altogether.

This lack of awareness was also felt by soldiers who did not leave the service upon return, but took up their daily work in the armed forces back at home instead. They described how they were explicitly told not to expect any interest from their colleagues and therefore were discouraged from discussing their experiences. Former officer Pieter described his reception on his first day back at the base in the Netherlands:

'Hey filthy cowboy, you are back, back in real life, and if you do something wrong, we will kick you out of the army' — that is how I was welcomed back. (...) I have not talked about Lebanon for years. I thought to myself: 'Okay, apparently nobody is interested.' (...) We were cowboys, supposedly always on the beach and stuff, that was the perception they had of us.

He described that as the years progressed, the army's interest in the UN mission in Lebanon gradually increased.

Up until today, Lebanon veterans say they have experienced a mixture of ignorance and indifference regarding their mission. Some said they felt fine with that: the mission was long ago, and actually not that special. Others felt bitterness: they made a sacrifice for their nation and for a cause, but their fellow countrymen did not care.

Ignorance breeding intolerance

When talking about how society views veterans nowadays, about half of the Lebanon veterans in this study described this as 'getting better'. By getting better, they meant that during the last two decades public attention for veterans has increased through veterans policy and public events. These informants also experienced that the societal status of the military profession has changed in a positive manner. They described how at the time of their deployment, the military was looked down upon by society, for a variety of reasons, including the fact that many were conscripted. In general, the public did not perceive this mandatory service as something valuable, according to these veterans. Also, at the time of their deployment to Lebanon the political climate was oriented more to the left side of the political spectrum than today. Veterans perceived the general political attitude at that time as 'anti-military', with no distinction made between the civilian and military policymakers in the Netherlands, and ordinary soldiers who carried out a mission. Some of my informants mentioned being called names when walking in uniform in public spaces, being called a 'murderer' or spit on. However, during the last decades, especially the last ten years, these veterans saw a change in these dynamics. Former officer Jan described how, after a World War Two commemoration, a little girl

approached him to ask him about his medals and some other citizens gathered around to hear his answer. He said:

And then we managed to get a real good conversation about veterans, deployments, and the Second World War with the children and adults who were standing there. So different from twenty or thirty years ago, how society views all this. [...] it was looked down upon, that you were a soldier. That has completely changed and I think that is good. Positive change.

The other half of the interviewed Lebanon veterans did not experience this change in public opinion in the same way. Although they felt 'positive vibes' on public events such as Veterans Day and Liberation Day, they still thought the average Dutch citizen has no conception of what a veteran is or what the military does. Former corporal Freddy said:

If I would go to my neighbours and say: 'I am a veteran' — then they would joke and say: 'I always knew you were the Prince of Carnival!' There are many people like them, or you get to hear something like: 'Oh I don't like war' — well, me neither. (...) A lot of people of these generations do not know what it means, a veteran.

In general, Lebanon veterans I spoke with believe there is room for growth when it comes to familiarity with veterans' lives and the work of the military in society, as ignorance may breed intolerance. Lebanon veterans linked lack of awareness among the Dutch public to hasty and uninformed judgments on both the military and veterans. Citizens base their view of the military on what the media presents to them, information which, according to the veterans, is focused on scandals and 'everything that is going wrong'. Based on only one article in a newspaper, veterans of a particular mission can be 'dragged through the mire' by civilians. Veterans perceived civilians to be judgmental on the way servicemen acted, while not grasping the context, or understanding the actual complexities and particularities of the situation. The way people judged colonel Karremans, commander of Dutchbat III, was mentioned as an example. Media reports were viewed to play a central role in societal ignorance.

Lebanon veterans also saw room for improvement when it comes to *appreciation* for the military and veterans — even though this had already improved compared to previous decades. When talking about the most ideal appreciation of veterans by society, several Lebanon veterans mentioned the way veterans are appreciated in the United States. They provided examples of spontaneous applause for veterans in public spaces such

as tourist attractions or restaurants, and expressed that they did not think this will ever happen here. According to them, Dutch culture is too 'sober' and less inclined to praise people who stand out of the crowd. Some expressed disappointment that veterans are not valued in the Netherlands as they are in the United States, while others mentioned that they find it important not to 'exaggerate' the attention that veterans receive. For example, these veterans compared the military profession to other professions such as teachers and train conductors, which are also of utmost importance to society. These types of occupations do not receive much public recognition or appreciation either, they said, and therefore veterans should be thankful for the societal recognition and appreciation that they do receive.

Illness, compensation, and how to talk about violence

Lebanon veterans believed the media promotes or encourages a distorted image of veterans as damaged and wounded. Former officer Hans, whose narrative was described in the previous chapter, was very active in veteran organisations and in buddy support. He mentioned how he, as a representative of veterans, sometimes was approached by the media with requests for veterans to tell their story in newspapers, on television, or on the radio.

For example, last week, I received a call and I proposed a certain person for an interview. Then I received this answer, literally: 'That one is not pitiful enough.'

Hans resented how the media focus on 'whine stories', while most veterans do not want to be pitied.

Some Lebanon veterans sensed that the image of the veteran as a pitiful victim of circumstances makes other veterans uncomfortable. They suspected that some veterans stay away from reunions and Veterans Days, because they think these gatherings are only visited by ill persons, who 'like to complain about their issues in the paper'. It was the perception of these Lebanon veterans that veterans who do not suffer from any trauma regarding their deployment, feel reluctant to identify as a veteran and to show themselves as a veteran. This is indeed the case, as we saw in the previous chapter.

Following from this public image, Lebanon veterans saw themselves confronted with a stereotype of the veteran receiving sums of financial compensations from the government. In recent years, several financial compensations were granted by court to Lebanon veterans suffering from mental health problems due to the deployment. The media paid attention to these court cases, which built a stereotype of a veteran receiving financial gain just by being a veteran.

Another topic that came up repeatedly was the public's common association between veterans and violence. They felt that people have a representation in their minds of the military as being eager to use violence, and contrasted this to the veterans' own perception of the military: an essential part of society, as the armed forces are an essential part of society, necessary for safety and security. Veterans stressed that the military is not directed at violence, per se, but at doing what is necessary to secure peace and stability, and using violence only as the last resort. Being a soldier is not merely about being able to use a weapon, they said; instead, it is about being decisive and taking action in crisis situations.

The strong association with violence and waging war influenced the way veterans are perceived by society. Lebanon veterans confronted the stereotype of soldiers that relish and glorify violence. Some of them mentioned how children especially have asked them whether they have killed, which they could forgive, since children do not know any better. Yet, they have found it frustrating, and hard to understand, when adults asked similar questions, since UNIFIL was a peace keeping mission.

However, the general public should not underestimate the level of threat during such a peace keeping mission, either. For instance, Lebanon veterans noted that the way politicians speak about military missions is contributing to the ignorance of civilians and therefore indirectly to prejudice and stereotyping. The topic of perpetuating and inflicting violence is evaded by politicians, and Lebanon veterans saw this as harmful for societal understanding of the military and its missions. According to some of the veterans, politicians present military missions as being only about securing peace or training local people. As a result, the harsh reality on the ground does not come through to ordinary citizens and civilians may think that veterans have not been through much. Similarly, some of the Lebanon veterans viewed the government's advice — which was given around the time of the interviews — not to wear a military uniform on the train as a sign of having to hide one's military identity, as if a soldier should be ashamed or scared because of their profession. So, on the one hand, the Lebanon veterans did not wish to be associated with violence or killing, yet on the other hand, they thought avoiding the word 'war' or eschewing the topic of the military's role in society does not do justice to military missions, either, and only increases ignorance about the work, experience, and value of soldiers to the larger society.

Reacting to perceived public opinion

In contrast with the stereotypical image of the holiday traveller returning to the Netherlands after a jaunt through an exotic landscape, most Lebanon veterans described their return home with the feeling of 'having done something special, something others were not willing to do'. They did this in the first place for the local people in Lebanon. Their time in Lebanon had improved the lives of the local people, even though conflicts

continue to torment the region and its inhabitants. Some veterans state that 'if you want to experience appreciation [as a Lebanon veteran], you should go to Lebanon'. As Hans said:

Thirty-five years later and those people still look at the Netherlands positively. And that is why I certainly tell people who wonder 'what good did it do' to go back to Lebanon, there and then you will know. It really did something, although you cannot solve a conflict of the last 1,000 years in a few years.

This sense of having done something useful for the local people, even in the short term, was a common sentiment shared among veterans. At reunions, the current situation in Lebanon was highlighted at information stands and in speeches. In the interviews, having improved the situation for local people provided a response to public opinion back then: the UNIFIL soldiers did not lay on the beach, getting tanned, but actually did something useful for people in need. This sense of fulfilment gave their deployment a purpose.

Concerning appreciation in their home country, some Lebanon veterans described how they experienced misunderstanding in Dutch society, and even if it had improved over the years, this made them insecure whether they would find understanding among regular civilians. When I asked former corporal Rudolf about whether he engaged in talking to non-veterans about him being a veteran, he stated:

That is hard, I find that really hard. I do try, but (...) I have that doubt. I think: 'Does he get it, or does he not get it?' (...) I have been talking for two hours straight here and it is beautiful, you listen, but that is your study, another person would never keep it up that long, he would not endure it and that is logical, that person does not have the time for this, he has other things to do.

Lebanon veterans not only have difficulties talking to civilians about the deployment, they also have found it hard to talk about their experiences within the military. As we saw in the quotation of Pieter earlier about his return to the army base in the Netherlands:

I thought to myself: 'Oh, apparently nobody appreciates the fact that I was there [in Lebanon, YR], apparently nobody wants to hear it, so I will just leave it like that.' I have not talked about Lebanon for years.

Many Lebanon veterans experienced relief at reunions. Among each other, they have found solidarity and mutual understanding. When together other, 'masks came off' once they knew they could talk about their experiences with an understanding and sympathetic audience. This is the same experience described by veterans of the Dutch East Indies War: nobody was interested in their story or understood what they had been through. Reuniting with other veterans who did made them finally realise they were not alone in this experience (De Reuver, 2021). Indeed, some Lebanon veterans compared themselves with veterans of the Dutch East Indies war, in the sense that they were conscripts, who were deployed far from home and who received little to no attention of the public when they came home.

Lebanon veterans kept remarks of Dutch civilians about their mission — such as underestimating or stigmatising comments — at arm's length by distancing themselves from the ones making these remarks. They felt like there is 'no use in arguing' and they just 'let it go'. The citizens who held the undesirable stereotypes of holiday-maker, victim, or lover of violence were, in turn, condemned. In these cases, the grammar of Orientalisation (Baumann, 2004; Said, 1978) seems to develop partly as a defensive technique with regard to the experience of being stereotyped. This grammar is one of Baumann's broad markers of identity (see Chapter One, pp. 23-24) that people and groups use to establish bonds and define group boundaries. This grammar is based on Said's Orientalism (1978), as a Western discourse contrasting the Western world with non-Western populations (the Orient). While most of the contrasting characteristics are in favour of the ones using this grammar, often, one or two characteristics portray the Other as 'better'. For instance, the Other may be barbaric compared to the civilised nature of the identifier, yet the Other is also considered more 'pure' than the identifier and envied for that. In the case of the Lebanon veterans, they described civilians who underestimate or judge them as individualistic or even egocentric, while veterans executed their mission in solidarity. Lebanon veterans described how non-veterans are less inclined to roll up their sleeves during work than veterans. They viewed veterans as being more interested in world politics and current military missions than regular civilians. Also, veterans are willing to take some risks, while civilians were perceived to prefer an average, safe, and sluggish way of life. While the veterans using this grammar were casting themselves in a more positive light than civilians, there was also, as with the grammar of Orientalisation, some sense of civilians actually being better off than veterans. This was especially the case among Lebanon veterans suffering from mental health problems at the time of the interview. They implied that not having been put to the test, of not having been exposed to harsh circumstances, also means less chance of exposure to traumatic events, just as caring for oneself as an individual is simpler and involves less accountability than caring for a group. Lebanon veterans portrayed civilians a bit as Western children: more carefree than adults, and carrying no responsibility for the wellbeing of others.

This came through in the language they used, the attitudes they expressed, and their perspectives, i.e. through their cultural grammar. But it is important to stress that this grammar was only used when talking about certain others, who in the veteran's eyes make short-sighted judgments. When asked directly what kinds of general differences they saw between veterans and civilians, Lebanon veterans often stated not to see that much differences.

Summary Lebanon veterans

Lebanon veterans in this study differed in the way they think society views the military. Although half confessed to feeling stigmatised and sometimes despised during their military service, they believed that in the past several years, public opinion on the military had become more open and more positive. The other half still believed that the public remained largely uninterested in and unaware of the military's work. They contrasted their conception of the public's view of the military — an institution directed at violence — with their views and experience of the military as actual veterans — an organisation needed to keep societies safe and secure. Concerning the public's opinion of Lebanon veterans in particular, the veterans in this study experienced certain prejudices and stereotypes that result from the public's lack of knowledge and lack of sincere interest. Although the Lebanon veterans in this study do not appreciate being seen as violent people, a complete avoidance of mentioning violence is not appreciated, either. Feeling misunderstood fosters the connection that veterans experience among themselves and also encourages their use of the grammar of Orientalisation.

4.2 SREBRENICA VETERANS: PUBLIC DEMOLISHMENT OF COWARDS AND MADMEN

In this section, I discuss and analyse the perceptions of Srebrenica veterans in this study on how the wider society views them. I first go into the perceived public opinion shortly after the fall of the safe area, followed by the general impression these veterans have of public opinion on the armed forces. Then, I discuss experiences of being judged by the public, which is central in Srebrenica veterans' narratives regarding public opinion, followed being stereotyped as 'crazy veterans'. Then, I describe how the veterans react to perceptions of the public. I finish with a summary of the findings.

'Chicken unit'

What stands out the most in the interviews with Srebrenica veterans is how betrayed they felt by several actors after the fall of the enclave (see also Driessen, 2021; Molendijk, 2020). For instance, they saw their reputation being damaged by the media reports after

their return. They believe the media made false statements and created misleading impressions concerning the goal of the mission. The image that emerged shortly upon their return — that of cowardly and irresponsible soldiers — seemed hard to change. Even at the time of the interviews, most tried to ignore media reports concerning Srebrenica and denied requests of journalists for interviews. Srebrenica veterans in this study felt they tried their best during their deployment, and they found it difficult to process that the image that lasted is that of ‘partying, drunk soldiers’ after the fall of the Safe Area. They experienced that as ‘hitting them when they were down’. As Ruud put it:

So, you return and then Dutchbat III gets blamed for it. Dutchbat III failed, Dutchbat III were cowards. So, then we were swamped with this whole media circus, on top of it all. So, first, you are abandoned by your own country, by the state, as we did not get the means we needed to do our job and then we were demolished in the media.

Adding to this sense of betrayal, is the feeling that politicians did not make an effort to challenge or correct the image constructed by the media. Srebrenica veterans felt let down by the government and did not think the fall of the cabinet in 1998 over the NIOD report on what happened in Srebrenica was enough to set this right. They were looking for rehabilitation and felt that politicians should have done more to restore the name of Dutchbat. They also thought the top of the armed forces should have done more in this regard, as they blamed them for having ‘sacrificed’ Dutchbat (see also Olff et al., 2020).

The veterans felt the media created a public image of Dutchbat soldiers as cowards. They were welcomed back home warmly by friends and family, but quickly upon their return the media judged harshly or disparaged how they had conducted their mission. Later, when Srebrenica veterans reintegrated into their normal social lives, they experienced further negative reactions on their mission from others in social situations, often from distant relatives or acquaintances. A veteran described a typical scenario to me.

You are attending this birthday party and there is always some kind of person who has an opinion on this. Who uses the word ‘coward’ and is like: ‘Couldn’t you have done this, or that?’ Well, the first three times that happens, you just smash this person out of the house. Literally. And then at some point, you do realise it is not going well with you.

This veteran also described how he decided not to attend these kinds of events anymore, in order to avoid getting into trouble again. The judgments described by the veterans are especially directed at the fall of Srebrenica, and the little Dutchbat III could

have done — or, in the eyes of their critics, *chose* not to do — to prevent the genocide from happening. Although Dutchbat III veterans overwhelmingly identified this stigma, veterans of Dutchbat I and especially II shared this perception, as they saw their deployment to be associated with the fall of the Safe Area as well when interacting with others (see also Driessen, 2021, who notes similar sentiments among Former Yugoslavia veterans in general, even among those deployed elsewhere in the Former Yugoslavia). Plus, when they explained they participated in an earlier rotation, people tended to assume that their mission was therefore ‘not that bad’. Dutchbat I and II veterans received this type of reaction as an underestimation of their experiences and a lack of sincere interest in what they saw, participated in, witnessed, and experienced.

Some of the informants noted that a change occurred at some point in public opinion regarding their mission, and believe that nowadays ‘people know it was not that simple’. However, most felt that the negative image that emerged in the media after July 1995 remained typical: ‘Dutchbat III, the chicken unit’. Some Srebrenica veterans compared their situation with the situation of East Indies veterans. These veterans were also maligned by the public, while they were the ones who had done the hard work in the name of the Kingdom. It took decades before these veterans received recognition from society and the government for all they had done. And even so, they are still under the suspicion of having participated in war crimes. Srebrenica veterans also made comparisons with the Vietnam War, as the American soldiers fighting in that war ran a high risk doing their job or duty to come home to a country that did not support the war.

Yet, although public opinion in the US may not have supported the war in Vietnam until its end, to the knowledge of veterans in this study, there were no prosecutions directed at soldiers serving in that war. My respondents contrasted this to the need the Dutch public did apparently feel to evaluate Dutchbat’s actions, while not being aware of differences between deployment reality and the reality ‘on paper’ in the Netherlands. Veterans described the discomfort they felt with the judgment that follows this evaluation, a judgment based on civilian standards while the actions took place in a military context in a warlike situation.

Who cares?

When talking about how society views the military in general, most Srebrenica veterans in this study indicated they felt the average Dutch citizen does not care much about the military. They saw this lack of care demonstrated by the massive budget cuts in recent years, which were executed under little societal protest. Emiel witnessed how a friend of his son, who joined the military, was mocked by his friends.

Nowadays, when you talk about the armed forces, well, they don’t think much of it. They showed the picture of their friend in uniform and said:

'Look at him, in his fancy dress, standing up all tall, hahaha!' I was like: be grateful that you have a friend who wants to join the armed forces and will serve the Netherlands during difficult times. Be proud of him!

Few Srebrenica veterans thought the way society views the military had improved over the years. In the interviews, it was generally noted that the professionalisation of the military had not led to improved appreciation for the ones serving. Whereas, in the eyes of the Srebrenica veterans, conscripts could count on public sympathy, since they simply 'had to' serve and sometimes had to go on deployment, there is less empathy for professional soldiers. Noticing this, the Srebrenica veterans described civilian attitudes to them being soldiers as: 'You chose it yourself: your life, your responsibility.' Civilians perceived the choice for the military occupation as an individual responsibility, for which the individual should bear the consequences. Veterans felt as if their own choice prohibited them from receiving appreciation or even sympathy if they experienced deployment related issues. For instance, former corporal Alex referred to the choice of this risky profession:

It costs lives. And that is horrible. The ultimate sacrifice. And you don't ask for that. And someone who says: 'Yeah, you can expect that if you are a soldier' — that is just rubbish. Because, when you are a truck driver, you have more chance to get involved with a traffic accident than someone who just drives commuter traffic. Still, you know, that does not mean one asks for it, no one *asks* for it.

Hence, most Srebrenica veterans perceived the occupation of serviceman as standing in lower regard than in previous decades. Besides the postponement of conscription, they thought this was caused by deployments receiving bad publicity. They described as 'back-stabbing practices' not only judgements on what happened during their own mission in Srebrenica, but also inquiries into incidents during the war in Dutch East Indies, and the prosecution of a Dutch serviceman who shot an Iraqi civilian. All in all, Srebrenica veterans thought these kinds of practices did not reveal a high level of appreciation for veterans in the Netherlands.

Further, the memory of a war on national ground has faded. War has become something taking place far away, which veterans perceive as another reason for less public support of the military. However, a couple of Srebrenica veterans did feel that compared to five or ten years ago, more people know what a veteran is and express sincere interest. They conceived this as an effect of veteran policy and the efforts of veterans themselves in programmes such as Veterans in the Class Room. Public attention at veteran parades,

especially in Wageningen on the 5th of May, was mentioned by these veterans as a sign of growing respect for veterans in general.

Srebrenica veterans thought that the media played an influential role in societal criticisms of soldiers' behaviour during deployments, as the media (in the veterans' eyes) only paid attention to deployments when there were incidents involving deaths, wounded, or potential scandals. However, when local people were helped by the deployed soldiers, this was not covered. The informants felt the reason for this was that positive news is not seen as news, and a soldier lending a helping hand to a local inhabitant is not impressive enough to report. Again, this was not an impression shared by all: some of the Srebrenica veterans did perceive news on deployments to become increasingly positive, or at least less judgmental than before. Others thought media attention on deployments is little to none, and when there is any coverage, it gives a simplistic and sensational image of reality.

'Crazy'

Srebrenica veterans claimed to frequently confront the stereotype of the 'crazy' and possibly 'dangerous' veteran. At the time of the interviews, veterans conceived attention in the media for veterans in general as focusing on topics such as PTSD, violence, and suicide. Veterans viewed this type of attention to be the basis of prejudices about them in society. They did not view the association with PTSD as inherently a bad thing, the issue veterans took here are the stereotypes associated with PTSD, as they perceived people to think of PTSD patients as aggressive, unpredictable, and dangerous.

Some of the Srebrenica veterans in this study felt increasingly associated with PTSD by the public throughout the years. In turn, they perceived PTSD to be associated by the public with dangerous, volatile, or otherwise 'crazy' behaviour. A couple of the veterans even suspected they were never hired for jobs they were interviewed for because of their deployment in Srebrenica. Although they did not suffer from any mental health issues, their potential employers did express concern over whether they would 'crack' under harsh circumstances. Indeed, the Srebrenica veterans who did have mental health problems felt stigmatised as 'crazy' or dangerous people.

Reacting to perceived public opinion

Countering the stereotypes of cowardly and incapable soldiers, Srebrenica veterans pointed to the fact that they were willing to risk their lives there, while all civilians judging them were sitting at home. They focused on the task they had to do, the mandate given, and often stated they did the best they could with the limited resources and freedom of movement within the rules of engagement. They believe they did something that was necessary and contributed to a higher, noble purpose. As Emiel said:

You are there, in an exceptional situation. With the Serbs who are in charge. As a soldier, you cannot always do or say as you please. You form just a tiny part of it all and you should fulfil your role as well as possible. That is supposed to be part of the bigger plan, of course.

This contributing to a bigger plan was described as something most other Dutch citizens were not willing to do. Srebrenica veterans in this study contrasted this sensibility with themselves, who were willing to sacrifice themselves for a higher purpose, in case the rules of engagement changed after air strikes attacking the Bosnian Serbs. They were prepared to go from 'blue to green', from peacekeeping to peace enforcement if they had to. It never came that far, but they emphasised this was beyond their responsibility, and they were prepared nevertheless. Some remarked that if Dutchbat had not been in Srebrenica, the eventual situation might have been much worse, as even more death and destruction would have taken place. Civilians judging Srebrenica veterans were dismissed by veterans for being ignorant, who assumed that the best strategy to handle these people is to ignore them. They believed paying attention to them is nothing but lost energy since 'you are not going to convince them otherwise'.

Srebrenica veterans emphasised that civilians 'will never understand' what veterans have been through. Understanding what war or living under harsh circumstances is like, makes veterans substantially different from Dutch non-veterans. This also makes it rather senseless to talk to civilians about their experiences, as some veterans pointed out. Former officer Ferdinand said:

They [civilians] do not get that anyway. I could tell you but you would not understand, I do not blame you for that by the way, but you cannot comprehend what it is like to have nothing, that is a concept you do not get.

YR: because I did not go through that myself.

Ferdinand: But you cannot go through that, since this does not happen in the Netherlands, if you turn the switch there is light, there is water, there is everything, but over there is nothing. The concept of 'nothing' and always a latent threat, you do not have that here, so understanding what that is like is truly hard. So I can tell you and you think 'that is bad'. And I see in your eyes: 'You do not understand shit.' And this has nothing to do with you personally, you get that, right? So why would you tell anyone about it, it makes no sense, it is not going to get you anywhere.

Similar to Lebanon veterans, among each other, most Srebrenica veterans found a mutual comprehension that is not present among non-veterans. Especially among fellow Srebrenica veterans, but also among veterans of other missions, they found mutual understanding. They described this as 'knowing what you are talking about', 'having the same sense of humour' and the same 'manner of dealing with things'. Finding appreciation among each other was for some an affirmation of being valued, seen, validated.

With each other, some of my informants talked about things they did not even discuss with their families. However, sometimes each other's company appeared to be more about a sense of being understood and accepted as they are, than about in-depth conversation. One of the respondents, for instance, described it is a sign of respect not to ask too much detailed information from someone about their deployment. Yet, it was important to be there for someone in case the other veteran needed to talk. When Srebrenica veterans experienced this mutual connection, they often described what united them, contrasting these characteristics with civilians: veterans are socially oriented, while civilians are more individualistic; veterans know how to set about their work, while civilians are more passive; veterans have respect for everyone, while civilians do not; veterans are decisive while civilians tend to give up easily. These differences are seen as differences between ex-servicemen and civilians in general, and perceived to count extra for veterans.

Again, not every Srebrenica veteran was on the same page here. Some of the Srebrenica veterans did not feel any need to talk about their experiences, with their fellow veterans or civilians. They viewed their deployment as a closed book, said to know for themselves they handled it the best they could and wished to continue with their lives. In general, they did not see much difference in attitude or behaviour between civilians and veterans. They had quit the armed forces and adapted to civilian life, which did not alter their sense of having gone through something special. Some believed other veterans remain stuck in the past. Former corporal Nico was one of the veterans who held this opinion. He even conceived a direct relation between societal misinterpretations of the deployment and other veterans lingering in the past.

Misunderstanding from society and not being in touch with one's feelings causes some veterans to withdraw and isolate. And many keep on living in that time [of military service].

He described how veterans who 'keep on living in that time', only open up in companionship of other veterans, which he viewed as unhealthy. Yet, he recognised it as a logical reaction to the experiences of being severely judged by society.

Given their sense of duty and sacrifice, it seems remarkable that Srebrenica veterans often told me that that veterans should not expect society to applaud them for what

they have done, but should continue to contribute to society. They found it important for veterans to be visible in society. This visibility should be increased by giving something to society based on the veterans' expertise that might be seen as a valuable contribution, such as participating in World War Two commemorations (see Chapter Five) or the Veterans Search Team (see Chapter Three). The ones mentioning this expressed satisfaction to see more and more veterans showing their added value to society. By adding value to society, the veterans hoped to demonstrate they are worthy of recognition and appreciation. I will elaborate more on this topic in the next chapter.

Summary Srebrenica veterans

In general, the Srebrenica veterans did not think the military stands in particular high regard within society. Few did experience some turning in the tide when it comes to societal view of veterans: they perceived more genuine interest and more knowledge on veterans, influenced by initiatives such as Veterans Day or Veterans in the Classroom. Concerning reactions to their mission in particular, all Dutchbat III veterans had experienced negative judgments concerning their moral values and being stereotyped as useless cowards. The ones serving in Dutchbat I and II faced similar reactions, combined with disregards or underestimations of their experiences. Only few experienced that the harshness of these judgments has faded to make space for more understanding the last years — most still believed the image of the craven, cowardly soldier with no moral conscience prevails, and that this image was and still is constructed by the media. Veterans resented politicians' and the top of the Ministry of Defence's not doing anything to refute this image to protect Dutchbat's name and reputation. My informants described as ignorant the civilians judging Srebrenica veterans, since their views were based mostly on newspaper articles that they believe ignored, misrepresented, or disparaged their service. The misunderstanding is painful and often causes veterans to stop sharing their stories with outsiders (see also Driessen, 2021), and turn to each other for comprehension instead. The veterans contrast themselves from their critics by using the grammar of Orientalisation. They mention veteran-specific characteristics such as decisiveness, being action-oriented, and offering camaraderie — and contrast these with (critical) civilians, who give up more easily, and are more passive and individualistic.

4.3 URUZGAN VETERANS: TAX MONEY, BLACK BOX, AND SWEEPING VIOLENCE

In this section, I outline how Uruzgan veterans in this study perceived public opinion of the military profession, veterans in general, and their mission in particular. I start by how they experienced societal views during and shortly after their deployment to Uruzgan,

followed by how they perceived public opinion on the armed forces in general. Then, I highlight the public image of veterans that came to the fore in the interviews, namely that of the violent killer who must be suffering now. I then describe how the Uruzgan veterans react to what others think of them. The section ends with a summary of the findings.

Through the eyes of the beholder

When discussing public opinion towards their mission, Uruzgan veterans highlighted how the scope and cost of the mission were initially underestimated, which later led to impatience and ongoing public debate about whether the mission was worth the price and the human sacrifice. In the beginning of the mission, some believed that the media were too positive about the local situation. As former NCO Thomas said:

Imagine that you are there and you live through a very different reality than everyone sees in the Netherlands. You receive messages from people at home: 'I heard that it is not so bad over there and that it is fun.' While you are thinking to yourself: 'Well, I do not know what it was I just went through, but I sincerely hope never to experience that again.' That is very annoying and you do not know whether you should tell your story or... I was not up to it, for explaining reality to them, (...) so I left it that way.

Other Uruzgan veterans described something similar, mentioning that Task Force Uruzgan (TFU) was underestimated until images were broadcast by a reporter who joined a unit on patrol, and 'had to take his gun and use it' in a firefight.

Uruzgan veterans noticed that the Dutch public soon wondered whether TFU was worth all this effort as well as the tax money. Uruzgan veterans received questions of conversation partners concerning the meaning and 'usefulness' of their mission. People appeared to wonder what the mission actually did for the local situation, and why the Netherlands should invest in the local situation. Veterans sensed that civilians thought the mission was not really serving any longer-term purpose. Indirectly, Uruzgan veterans saw politicians as being responsible for further increasing society's impression that the deployment to Uruzgan had little effect on the long term. Politicians aborted the mission to Uruzgan too soon for it to have a lasting local impact, according to the veterans. This decision stimulated the general public to question the usefulness of the mission.

The media were very influential in constructing a public image of the mission concerned with its effect, according to Uruzgan veterans. Some summarised the reports on TFU as incorrect or biased, either too positive or too critical. For instance, media reports focused on showing that the mission did not succeed in building democracy in Afghanistan, which Uruzgan veterans conceived as a 'leftist' perspective. According to

veterans, reporters were only interested in 'misery' or when 'things go wrong', while they lacked attention to the successful reconstruction efforts in the area. Uruzgan veterans in this study felt most journalists lacked the time to do in-depth investigations. They mentioned the images of Dutchbat III soldiers partying after the fall of Srebrenica as an example of the practice of media creating a hasty, incomplete, and therefore harmful picture.

The usefulness of a military

Uruzgan veterans experienced the level of in-depth interest or appreciation for the military as generally low among civilians. They sensed that citizens thought the military is primarily expensive, a burden on their tax money. It stung them how easily budget cuts for the Ministry of Defence were realised, without any resistance from the public. Some even felt Dutch citizens look down upon the military, as if the soldier choosing this career must be a strange person. Uruzgan veterans felt there is not much knowledge among citizens what the military's work is actually about, and blamed this on a basic lack of interest, coming from 'Dutch culture' where the military is 'not being looked up to'. They also blamed individualism for this lack of interest. The basic mindset in society, as was also described by the Srebrenica veterans, is that every individual is responsible for himself, which also translates in the attitude towards veterans that they have chosen the military profession themselves and should not expect anything in return from those who have not chosen this career path. Uruzgan veterans implied that postponement of conscription has led to this gap between the military and society. Since soldiers now choose their profession, they are viewed as responsible for any consequences, and should not expect citizens to be particularly receptive to hearing about their experiences. Mostly, Uruzgan veterans described this as an unchanging, stable situation — or, if a dynamic is observed, they felt that public opinion on the military has become increasingly ignorant over the years. According to the veterans, the Dutch have become more and more focused on what happens in their 'own tiny country' while dismissing the suffering of human beings abroad.

Just as in the public image of TFU, Uruzgan veterans saw an important role for the media in constructing the public image of the military. They felt the armed forces were only covered in media reports in a negative context, such as accidents and scandals. They also believed that foreign images shaped the public image of the military. For instance, Dutch citizens who did not know the military from the inside, based their ideas of the institution on Hollywood movies.

At the same time, several Uruzgan veterans pointed to the fact that the military is not very open about its activities or about what happens during deployments, which causes public ignorance and decreases support for the military among citizens. This affects how these citizens look at veterans: as it is unclear to citizens what veterans have actually

done on deployments, it remains unclear why veterans should be appreciated. When society does appreciate veterans, Uruzgan veterans tended to perceive this gesture as shallow, since the ones giving them this appreciation were seen as not actually knowing why they would deserve that. However, most Uruzgan veterans stressed that they did not take this personally, and did not feel the need to be appreciated by the wider public. Instead, they felt enough appreciation for what they did from their former buddies, their close relatives and from themselves, as they looked back in pride on their deployment.

The Uruzgan veterans in this study compared the way veterans are viewed in society with how this is done in the United States (U.S.), where veterans are 'truly worshipped'. In comparison, the Dutch appear to be rather cold towards its veterans. Some Uruzgan veterans said they are fine with that, others did think the Netherlands could use the U.S. as a model. They mentioned gestures such as spontaneous appreciation, closed doors that open once it is known you are (in partnership with) a veteran, respect that is shown in public. They mentioned that the 'Dutch culture' is simply not characterised by open appreciation — the Dutch saying 'act normal, that is crazy enough' was phrased here. All in all, while Uruzgan veterans did not desire appreciation to mimic that of the U.S. ('that would be a little bit overdone'), they did think Dutch society could learn a thing or two from the Americans when it comes to appreciating its veterans.

'You must be suffering now'

Shortly upon their return, Uruzgan veterans described themselves as full of stories about their deployment, which they were eager to share with anyone interested. To their disappointment, and similar to Lebanon veterans, their eagerness to share their stories was not met with curiosity. They felt that people became impatient with their deployment stories. Also, they described how even people who expressed interest seemed reluctant to listen to detailed accounts of what they had witnessed or gone through in Afghanistan. Thomas concluded that civilians could not deal with his stories of the reality of war:

It is not the case that they are not interested. They can't, they don't know how to react to your stories. (...) In the beginning, when they asked how it was, I said: 'Pretty impressive, we have been shot at, we received bombs and grenades, people were wounded and killed', and so on. Yeah, that was like a tide for those people, they could not cope with that. They did not know how to react. I noticed how they reacted non-verbally, almost in shock.

Thomas adjusted his story a bit, and created 'an expurgated version' to make sure that people left the conversation with a 'correct image' of him, the military, and the mis-

sion in Uruzgan and were no longer in shock by what he told them — providing ‘an advertising brochure, so to speak.’ This story illustrates one difference in lived reality between veterans and civilians. Thomas described his listeners as simply being unable to handle his horrific truth.

Nevertheless, some people did appear to be curious about the dirty details of the military job, namely, when Uruzgan veterans were asked about ‘having killed’ in battle and ‘how many they shot.’ It led to irritation among the veterans for several reasons. First, they did not appreciate their former job to be reduced to the act of killing, as in that way they felt stereotyped as a violent killer. They saw their job as being about so much more, such as good leadership, providing first aid to others, and maintaining calmness and concentration under pressure. Second, they observed how civilians posed such questions but then seemed unable to handle their honest answer. As soon as they confirmed to have used violence in order to eliminate the enemy, their public assumed that this was bothering the veterans on a mental level. When the veteran then indicated he was not suffering from trauma or guilt, their conversation partners thought that was odd or ‘crazy.’ Thomas:

People always ask: ‘Doesn’t it bother you, what you did?’

- ‘No, I don’t mind.’

‘But *that* is weird, isn’t it?’

- ‘No, it is not weird at all.’

Then you get that type of conversation, and these are not pleasant talks.

Or people say: ‘Yeah but sometimes, I do notice *something* about you [implying that Thomas suffered mentally even when he denied it].’

This implicit association with PTSD or mental health issues in general is the prejudice Uruzgan veterans most often mentioned when asked how they felt society viewed them. They were annoyed by this stereotype. The veterans felt people assumed that the deployment still ‘bothers’ them — and in this way casting them as victims instead of devoted soldiers. Also, the media strengthened the image of the suffering veteran. There was not much media coverage of veterans who are doing well, according to the Uruzgan veterans. Some did see that efforts are being made, mainly by implementers of veteran policy, to improve this image. However, most thought the veteran image as broadcasted by the media remains too negative.

Reacting to perceived public opinion

When talking about public opinion questioning the effects of the mission, Uruzgan veterans often referred to themselves as ‘instruments of politics.’ They were sent to Uruzgan by politicians, and on location they carried out the orders of their superiors. Therefore,

they felt unable to react to people questioning whether the mission made sense. They did their job and they did it as well as they could (see also Molendijk, 2020). Although they did express frustration over the end of the mission, since it had not yet achieved its objectives, they also claimed not to wonder whether they brought democracy to Afghanistan. As one Uruzgan veteran put it:

If you go think about that — that broader objective, well, that is the recipe to drive yourself crazy.

Instead, Uruzgan veterans focused on how they behaved as professional soldiers and how well they performed their specific tasks. This is what made the mission worthwhile for them, whether they carried out their duty, and not whether the overall ideological or geopolitical objectives, as defined by policymakers or the media, were ever met.

Civilians who judge the military to be useless and taking up too much tax funds, were judged by the veterans as being ignorant: 'It's just talk, they have no clue.' From the perspective of Uruzgan veterans, these people do not 'actually care'. They base their judgments on what they see on the television, 'unable to see further than the end of [their] nose'. Here veterans contrasted attitudes of civilians with those of the veterans, as the latter have seen more of the world and know that not everything is as simple as civilians think. As we saw in the previous chapter, Uruzgan veterans often portrayed civilians as people who prefer talking over action, in contrast to veterans. When talking about judgmental civilians, these civilians were often portrayed as carefree people who have the luxury to judge out of ignorance, while veterans have taken risks by serving the Kingdom. For instance, Danny described how he saw himself being confronted with 'leftist' civilians who judged him because he was enthusiastic about his time in Uruzgan and called his work as a sniper 'fun':

Yes, Groen Links [a Dutch left-wing political party], those sorts of persons. I have nothing against them, not at all. I find them all very friendly. That's what we fight for, you know, and that's what we're here for so they don't have to. They don't see it (...), but you also do it for those people. Because you know when those planes flew into that tower, then everyone said: we have to do something about it. Yes, of course we were in Afghanistan, because we had to do something about it. (...) Yes, you know, those people with Mohawk haircuts can step on our flag while smoking some weed. Yes, I also think that is all perfect, they can all enjoy it, but that is why I entered service.

The picture of Dutch civilians as carefree, naive kids was painted by many Uruzgan veterans. They often implied that civilians do not know or see the world as it really is.

Some stated they cannot 'blame' civilians for this attitude. Civilians have nothing but the media to base their judgments on, since they have not been in Uruzgan to see the situation with their own eyes. As former corporal Michael said:

If I had not been there, I probably would have said the same things.

The veterans felt there is no use in convincing these people otherwise, since they did not understand, and never will.

To refute the stereotype of the soldier as violent killer, Uruzgan veterans tended to refocus on their tasks during deployment and the skills they trained to perform that task as well as possible. Consider the words of former sniper Danny, who experienced difficulties in finding a civilian job:

Of course, they see sniper on my resumé, of course, one is very proud of that, I have put it at the top of the list, almost with giant letters: sniper. But then, yeah, lots of people think: 'Hey, that is a murderer, someone who can kill.' While I see proof of someone who can work very independently, can carry out an assignment thoroughly... I carry out assignments down to the very last detail.

Here he focuses on the skills he had to develop in order to become a sniper, instead of the objectives of the tasks themselves, namely the (possibly) fatal consequences for his enemies.

Among each other, Uruzgan veterans found confirmation both of their military achievement and their experiences with civilians who did not understand or lacked interest in their deployment stories. For instance, Thomas already described how he expurgated his version of the deployment story to meet the world view of his listeners. Uruzgan veterans share the 'unexpurgated versions' of their deployment experiences with fellow veterans. Recall how Erik said it took him some time to realise that 'this was not America' and in the Netherlands you should keep your military experiences to yourself (see Chapter Three). He realised that he could only share these with others who had deployment experience, such as the buddies with whom he deployed, saying:

At first you are still full of enthusiasm and you want (...) to tell it all, at least I did, but I noticed that it was not much appreciated. Then you realise that and then you give it a place and you find your way. I had a few guys from the deployment live here in the area and then I would regularly meet with

them. And then we could relive our story again and it was good again. I noticed then that I was not the only one who thought about it [attitudes in society] that way.

The last sentence of this quotation indicates that turning to each other not only serves as the confirmation of their job being necessary and well done, but it also reinforces the conviction that regular civilians do not understand veterans or are not interested in their stories. By this, veterans might encourage each other to keep silent or to censor the stories they tell civilians. In that way, group cohesion, in turn, further stimulates veterans to feel misunderstood or neglected.

Summary Uruzgan veterans

Uruzgan veterans in this study perceived little public interest or appreciation for the Dutch military. The veterans believed this lack of interest and awareness to be the result of Dutch societies' individualistic mindset. They perceived the same attitude concerning veterans in general: citizens are not aware of what veterans did, let alone of why they would deserve special attention. Also, if citizens think that veterans deserve special attention, it is because they assume every veteran suffers from PTSD and needs support for that. This is an undesirable stigma for the Uruzgan veterans. While the veterans were proud of how they performed their tasks in the field, they believed the public reduced their roles to either killing machines or victims. They believed that the media fosters the image of the veteran as a victim, while the attention for military missions is shallow and sensational. When it comes to criticisms and judgments regarding what Dutch soldiers did in Afghanistan, the Uruzgan veterans often dismissed these critics as ignorant and naive. They turned to each other for support, and to share their stories on both the deployment and on the societal misunderstandings and judgments they experience. In this way, external judgments have increased group cohesion, while group cohesion also has also stimulated feeling judged by outsiders.

4.4. HOW DO THEY SEE US?

In the three veteran groups, there was much similarity regarding perceived public opinion concerning the military and veterans in general. What emerged was a disconnect between military and civil realities, which reflected societal ignorance of what the occupation of a soldier entails. As ignorance breeds intolerance, veterans confronted undesired stereotypes of themselves, as well as judgments about their mission. In turn, they mirrored the practice by stereotyping judgmental civilians. In this section, I analyse, with support from the literature, the similarities and differences they saw concerning

the civilian-military gap, mysteries and impurities around their former occupation, and the way they coped with this impurity and lack of clarity.

Civil-military gap

In all three groups of veterans, regardless of whether the individual identified as a veteran, virtually all veterans thought civilians do not know much about what the military actually does or who is a veteran. They believed that civilians often oversimplified and underestimated the actual situation military personnel faced on the ground during deployment, especially concerning the level of threat and violence. While some veterans were outraged by this, others were more resigned. The veterans in this study blamed societal lack of interest and ignorance when it comes to the military on 'Dutch culture'. In the literature, it has been argued that the societal self-image of the Netherlands can be defined as peaceful and reluctant to go to war, sometimes tending towards cowardliness or surrender. The quick defeat by Germany in May 1940 as well as the fall of Srebrenica are sometimes cited as evidence of this aversion to warfare (Klep, 2019a, p. 60). At the same time, the literature acknowledges that, when looking at historical facts, this non-belligerent image is more myth than reality. History demonstrates otherwise, especially with respect to the Dutch colonial past (Elands, Van Woensel, & Vink, 2019; Klep, 2019a, 2019c; Klinkert, 2008; Molendijk, 2020; Van der Meulen & Soeters, 2005). However, this perception of the nation's characteristics is influential, since 'if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences' (Thomas William & Thomas, 1928, p. 572). In this case, this means that the believe that the nation is reluctant to participate in wars gives the military, deployments, and veterans an ambiguous place in society, as they symbolise the use of violence and therefore do not correspond with the most common self-image of the nation. The discrepancy between society's self-image and the objective of the military makes the relationship complicated.

Before 1995, military conscription provided a bridge between the military and society, and therefore, between what I call martial and non-martial worlds. Paradoxically, all groups mentioned postponement of conscription as a reason for both increasing appreciation as well as declining sympathy for the military. Lebanon veterans thought that conscription made the military unpopular, as being obliged to spend time in this hierarchical world — while having to delay education or a civil career — was not appreciated by everyone. On the other hand, Srebrenica and Uruzgan veterans saw conscription as a way to stimulate societal affinity with the military, as regular citizens received an impression of what working in the military entailed. Since conscription was postponed, these veterans saw an increasing distance between military and society, defined in the literature as the 'civil-military gap' (see, e.g. Caforio, 2005; Feaver & Kohn, 2001; Hines et al., 2015; Strachan, 2003; Thompson et al., 2017; Weibull, 2005). Namely, a common concern in Europe as well as in Canada and the U.S. is that, with the end of

compulsory military service and with wars being conducted outside one's own territory, the civil-military gap is increasing. As civilians are no longer familiar with the reality of military life and do not experience the purpose of the military first-hand, societal understanding of and empathy with the armed forces may decline. This is a concern the Srebrenica and Uruzgan veterans agreed with, while Lebanon veterans thought that a little more distance between the military and society is increasing societal appreciation for professional soldiers. Whatever the consequences may be for societal appreciation, what is beyond dispute is that postponement of conscription leads to fewer civilians knowing the military from within (see also Klep, 2019c, p. 163).

Mystery and impurity

Fewer civilians knowing what it entails to work in the military, together with the lack of transparency of the military, what Soeters defined as being 'inner directed' and internal loyalty (2018a, p. 26), contributes to the mystery surrounding the job of a soldier. This mystery or lack of awareness of an area of social life can easily transform into suspicion and condemnation, according to anthropologist Mary Douglas. She argued that societies are occupied with keeping themselves 'clean' in terms of morality. They do so by identifying and excluding 'impure' activities or people undertaking these activities, such as night workers or beggars (Douglas, 2003 [1966]). Certain occupations can be considered impure, defined by anthropologist Blok (2001) as 'infamous occupations'. Workers of these occupations often operate along boundaries, places where the average citizen would not go, or hold a lifestyle that appears unsafe to the average citizen, such as itinerants. Blok referred to earlier ages here, where musicians, artists, and also soldiers followed such lifestyles. Nowadays, soldiers on deployment still find themselves in places that appear unsafe to the average citizen. War areas abroad are eminently places where a civilian usually would not go. Soldiers returning from these places represent a threat, namely the disturbance of the peaceful order within the nation. Their presence makes the citizens aware that peace is not a static given, that war exists and always latently threatens the existence of peace. In other words, soldiers remind civilians in a peaceful nation of a threat that could contaminate the clean environment of peace the citizens live in. Society prefers to keep itself pure, so it may acknowledge the importance of the soldier to keep impure threats out, while at the same time the soldier returning from this duty represents this very threat and therefore leads to a fear of societal contamination (Blok, 2001).²⁴

24 See also Granjo (Granjo, 2007), who analysed a post-war cleansing ritual in Mozambique. In this ritual, soldiers who return home after fighting in the civil war were ritually cleansed before reintegrating in their community. It symbolised a fresh start for the veteran as well as re-acceptance of him as a member like any other community member.

Organisational psychologists Ashforth and Kreiner (1999, 2014a, 2014b), based themselves on work of Hughes (1958), and presented similar ideas concerning stigmatised occupations. They argued a job becomes dirty when it represents physical, social, or moral taboos. They suggested that the job of a soldier can be considered 'dirty work' (2014b, p. 87). Namely, the soldier finds himself in both a physical taboo, since he does his job running the risk of death or injury, as well as a moral one, since his job involves crossing moral boundaries, particularly the use of violence (see also MacLeish, 2021). Recall how Thomas edited his deployment story into 'an expurgated version' of his experiences. Note that expurgation in Dutch ('kuisen') means 'clearing of inappropriate expressions'. In other words, the dirt is filtered from Thomas' story, as he found that his original story left his listeners with the wrong impression of working in the military or even in shock. Bergman and Chalkley (2007) argued that dirt can be 'sticky': it can last even after one has left the service, especially when the former occupation carries a moral stigma. Moral stigma affects the impression of one's personality the most and can, for instance, limit future job opportunities (Bergman & Chalkley, 2007).

Indeed, veterans saw themselves confronted with stereotypes of perpetrator and victim, both relating to the moral ambiguity surrounding their former occupation. Both stereotypes are similar to what other studies of veterans described concerning public opinion of veterans (see, e.g. Douds & Ahlin, 2019; Duel, Truusa, & Elands, 2019; McCartney, 2011; Molendijk, 2020; Phillips, Connelly, & Burgess, 2020; Smith & True, 2014; Sørensen, 2015). First, the public image of the veteran as a violent warrior relates to the moral boundary soldiers are trained to cross — namely, using violence to wound or kill an enemy (see also MacLeish, 2021). Second, the image within society of the veteran as a traumatised victim with PTSD relates to the consequences of spending time in a 'dirty' environment, that is, in war or situations of military conflict. It appears the public assumes that being in a war always contaminates one's mind. As Thomas described, civilians became uncomfortable when he admitted to have used violence against others and then indicated he did *not* suffer from this. I want to argue here that suffering from mental health issues in a way 'purifies' the veteran *in the eyes of society*. I stress that I do not want to downplay the psychological suffering of veterans by any means. I do not mean to degrade their pain as a way of rinsing themselves of bad deeds, as I know this pain is real. I do want to indicate here, however, that the image of the suffering veteran appeals to society for a reason. Media focus on veterans with PTSD because that is the image that appeals to the nation's perception of moral conscience. Namely, although the veterans have been in an uncertain environment opaque to most civilians, where they might have crossed society's moral standards in terms of wounding or killing others, the suffering resulting from this shows they possess the same moral conscience as civilians.

After all, in a peaceful society, there is a common (moral) agreement that it is wrong to use violence among each other. Civilians see the military as an institutional exception

to this agreement. That implies that ex-soldiers have lived in a situation with different moral standards, in which they have done things they should not do as civilians. So the suffering from mental health issues demonstrates, from the perspective of society, that the veteran is aware that the use of violence is wrong. Then, from a macro-perspective, the attention toward mental health struggles among veterans functions to wash off the moral ambiguity of the soldier as he or she transitions into the role of civil citizen. Supporting evidence for this argument comes from Phillips, Connelly, & Burgess (2020), who put out a questionnaire among citizens of the United Kingdom (UK) to study the association the public holds with soldiers and veterans. They conclude that the qualification 'victim' is only associated with veterans, not with soldiers. In the UK, a soldier obtains the status of veteran once they leave the service. Apparently, when soldiers reintegrate into society, they are more likely to be viewed as a victim than during service.

Coping with impurity

The reactions of others that veterans face make them feel that they have to defend themselves, either in terms of morality or in terms of sanity. Veterans in all three groups tried to avoid the subject of their deployment when they felt they ran the risk of being judged by others. I am not sure if this can be qualified as shame, as Giddens (1991, pp. 71-73) suggests. It appears more as a sense of lost effort to try to make others understand. Veterans estimated it to be a mission impossible to convince people who already have their minds made up about the military and its missions.

While veterans declined to explain themselves to civilians who assumed all veterans were mentally ill or violent *in general*, in their narrative they did try to refute *mission specific* stereotypes. Ashforth and Kreiner (2014b) distinguished several strategies used by workers of so-called tainted occupations to 'purify' their work. The strategy all veteran groups use is that of 'performing a critical service' (89-90). This strategy means that workers emphasise they did something necessary for their clients, in particular, or for the greater good. The workers often imply that the ones they are providing this critical service for would be much worse off without them.

This strategy resembles to the way Cambodia veterans give meaning to their mission of Schok (2009). It also applies to the recent view on the military's right to exist, namely to 'do good', even if the 'good' is done on extra-national soil, as Klep (2019d, pp. 210-211) described. In the case of Lebanon veterans, the collective receiving the critical service was the local population in Lebanon. The Lebanon veterans did not lie on the beach, nor run around like G.I. Joe's, so they were neither holiday-goers nor Rambo's. Instead, they did something purposeful during their time in Lebanon.

Srebrenica veterans faced a heavier moral stigma than Lebanon veterans, as they felt judged and dismissed as cowards. They combined the discourse of having performed a critical service, doing something necessary that others were not prepared to do, with

emphasising how they were willing to sacrifice themselves for the mission, as they were prepared to fight when ordered to. By this, they refuted the public image of cowards, as they emphasised it was not out of cowardice they did not engage in combat, but because of a lack of possibility to do so. This lack of possibility was created by ruling powers, predominantly the UN and the state of the Netherlands. Here, Srebrenica veterans used an ideology that Ashforth and Kreiner defined as 'neutralising' (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999, p. 422), which means that the worker emphasises he is just carrying out tasks within a larger system he did not invent himself. This is indeed inherent to the work of the soldier, whose room for personal initiative is small, or even non-existent.

Uruzgan veterans faced moral judgment, just as Srebrenica veterans did. However, this moral judgment is related to being involved in combat instead of *not* being involved in combat. Civilians reflected a certain curiosity for the 'dirty details' (notice how the phrase references impurity) by asking Uruzgan veterans about killing enemies, while simultaneously assuming crossing this moral boundary can lead to nothing else but mental health issues. The Uruzgan veterans responded by refocusing (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999, p. 423) on their tasks. Refocusing was described by Ashforth and Kreiner as shifting the attention to stigmatised features of the job, in this case, using deadly weaponry, to non-stigmatised features of the job, such as concentrating, maintaining control and oversight, and showing decisiveness. Uruzgan veterans emphasised that they excelled in performing these tasks. They combined this refocusing with neutralising the performance of these tasks, by emphasising to have performed these tasks by order of a more powerful actor, such as their commander or the Kingdom of the Netherlands. Uruzgan veterans also used the discourse of providing a critical service, however, in contrast to Lebanon and Srebrenica veterans, their clients were not the local people of Afghanistan, but the citizens of the Netherlands. Recall how Danny said that these citizens can do as they please, as he and his buddies secured peace and safety for them. In other words, Uruzgan veterans did the dirty work, so Dutch civilians could live carefree in a peaceful paradise. This applies much to the general attitude of the Ministry of Defence and of politicians when deploying soldiers: they are doing so 'to make the Netherlands a safer place' (Klep, 2019d, p. 245). Or as the recruiting slogan of the Ministry of Defence in 2015 said: 'Our freedom begins with the freedom of others' (ibid, p. 210).

Further, veterans in all groups cope with reactions of impurity by maintaining 'social buffers' (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014b, pp. 90-92). This means that they seek each other's company to receive confirmation that they provided a critical service for the local population, that they were doing as ordered, and/or that they performed their tasks well. Veterans adjust their stories for civilians and look to fellow veterans to share stories that are closer to their personal experiences. As McAdams and McLean (2013) argued: who one's audience is influences the story that is told and therefore, the identification

process. Indeed, as we have seen, the way veterans present themselves among each other often differs from the way they show themselves to the outside world.

Mirroring ‘us’ versus ‘them’

A defensive strategy all three groups have in common is what Baumann defined as the grammar of Orientalisation, or Reverse Mirror-Imaging, based on Said’s work (1978) about how Westerners describe ‘the Orient’ to themselves (Baumann, 2004, pp. 19-21). Veterans used this discourse to mark differences between themselves and regular civilians especially when talking about others they felt were judging and stereotyping them. Table 4.1 shows the contrast of different characteristics veterans identified when comparing themselves to civilians. As we saw in Chapter One, soldiers still in service (Bogaers et al., 2020; Hale, 2008; Sion, 2006; Soeters, Winslow, & Weibull, 2006; Thompson et al., 2017; Wilson, 2008) or transitioning as a civilian into society (Binks & Cambridge, 2018; Christensen et al., 2018; Cooper et al., 2018; Demers, 2011; Smith & True, 2014) contrasted themselves with civilians in sometimes stark terms. For example, they compared their own physical and mental endurance with the weaknesses of regular civilians, saw themselves as action-oriented instead of passive, they had a collective instead of an individualistic outlook, and they kept calm under harsh circumstances and physical danger, while civilians did not face these sorts of uncertainties and risks. Emphasising these differences is part of military culture.

In this chapter, I showed that these differences continue to be relevant after having left the service, especially when reactions from civilians to veterans and their service demonstrate a lack of understanding and differences in perception. Compared to the discourse of soldiers in service or soldiers leaving the service, among veterans who have left the service many years ago, the physical and mental endurance and toughness is replaced with a more general sense of being decisive. Further, the consequences of having been under harsh circumstances and having had a risky job are underlined. However, military inheritance in the discourse is still obvious when looking at table 4.1. That this grammar of expression stems from military service is also shown by being the most prominent among Uruzgan veterans, for whom, as we saw in the previous chapter, identification as a soldier is most salient of the three groups. For these more recent veterans, contrasts with civilians were more prominent than for Lebanon veterans, for whom identification with the military is less relevant nowadays. In that case, the contrasts between veterans and civilians only became relevant when Lebanon veterans talked about civilians who judge the military, its missions, and veterans.

Characteristics such as being lazy, passive, individually minded, acting out of self-interest and being ignorant about the world are negative values compared to being decisive, action-oriented, socially minded, acting for the greater good and having seen the world. Still, these negative values create the possibility of living innocent and care-

free lives, as civilians are free do to as they please, are not responsible for a greater good and can hold on to their naive world view. In this, veterans expressed the sentiment of what Baumann described: 'What is good in us is [still] bad in them, but what got twisted in us [still] remains straight in them' (2004, p. 20). It 'entails a sense of loss', as the veterans described themselves as having lost this naive look on the world and having lost the luxury of only caring about themselves. In other words, the othering of civilians also means 'a distancing from an uncomplicated idea of the self' (p. 20).

It is important to underscore that these differences are not always felt. Veterans who have left the service are, after all, civilians themselves and therefore, a civilian is not always necessarily the Other. The Othering seems to decrease when the deployment is longer ago, and increases if veterans feel judged or underestimated by civilians. During the interviews, I always asked directly whether veterans saw differences between veterans and non-veterans. While some said they did, it also happened that this ques-

Table 4.1 Grammar of Orientalisation among veterans

Veterans	Civilians
Decisiveness	Laziness
Action-oriented	Preference for talking
Socially minded	Individually minded
Acting for the greater good	Acting out of self-interest
Have seen the world	Ignorant about the world
Aware of the harshness of the world	Innocent and carefree

tion was answered negatively. Still, the grammar of Orientalisation came up when these respondents talked about feeling ignored, misunderstood and judged. The crossing of the boundary of the group, as Barth (1969) described, is visible here. Veterans can cross the boundary and be first and foremost Dutch citizens, until they feel addressed as veterans by negative media reports or unpleasant conversations about their military past. Then, their identification as veterans becomes relevant and therefore, the grammar of Orientalisation is applied.

While functioning as a response to feeling judged out of ignorance and lack of interest among civilians for the military missions and veterans, using this grammar keeps the civil-military gap wide and real, as it is used among each other to define the differences between 'us' and 'them'. When important listeners, such as fellow veterans, agree with one's story, it becomes internalised, as McAdams and McLean (2013) described. This creates a vicious cycle: while experiencing ignorance, misunderstanding, and stereotyping leads to an increased need to see and speak to each other, the stories shared within the group foster perceptions of outsiders as being ignorant and judgmental (see also

MacLeish, 2021). However, some veterans in this study were active to break this vicious cycle and tried to influence their public image. I will elaborate on that in the next chapter.





5

Having fun, restoring dignity, and not showing up: Veterans' construction of a public image

In previous chapters we saw that most veterans in this study thought that civilians do not understand them. As a consequence, most veterans said they do not often engage in conversations about their deployment. Nevertheless, some veterans chose public settings to openly identify themselves as veterans, and eventually shared their stories. This chapter focuses on particular contexts in which one's identification as a veteran is relevant and can be presented to non-veterans. A notable setting in which veterans can present themselves to a smaller audience is a guest lecture. This is done through the programme *Veterans in the Classroom* by the Netherlands Veterans Institute, mentioned in previous chapters, but also through the Westerbork²⁵ Foundation or through other institutions, such as rotary clubs and universities. Finally, events take place during which veterans can present themselves collectively, in settings like Veterans Day and World War Two (WW2) commemorations.

The Netherlands Veterans Day is celebrated every last Saturday of June – the Saturday closest to the 29th of June, the birthday of the late Prince Bernhard. The prince, having served during WW2, always felt close to veterans. Veterans Day in The Hague consists of a closed meeting with speeches by governmental officials as well as invited veterans, followed by a medal parade, an event with food, music, and information stands, and finally a veterans parade through the city of The Hague with an official salute from the king. Veterans Day has its local and regional versions during the whole year. Activities on these local days are diverse. Some municipalities organise their own local parade, some receive veterans for breakfast with the mayor, and some focus on facilitating veterans meeting each other. The objective of Veterans Day, both national and local versions, is to publicly express societal recognition and appreciation for veterans (Netherlands Veterans Institute, 2014).

During the interviews, veterans brought up the importance of WW2 commemorations. These events take place on May 4th and 5th, which respectively commemorate war victims and victims of peace operations and celebrate the freedom, peace and security society knows in the Netherlands. May 4th commemorations include the national commemoration in Amsterdam, where veterans form a guard of honour for, among others, the king and queen; the commemoration at the War Cemetery in Loenen (see text box 5.1); local memorial rituals, for example speeches and laying a wreath at a monument. All these commemorations entail a moment of silence to commemorate the dead. May 5th is Liberation Day. In Wageningen, the place where the capitulation of the German troops in the Netherlands was signed in 1945, there is a parade for veterans. Also, about fifteen cities in the Netherlands have their own liberation festival with music and information stands. Since 2015, visitors at these festivals have been able to 'speed date with

25 Westerbork is a Dutch village where a transit camp for Dutch Jews was hosted during the Second World War. Nearly 100,000 Dutch Jews were deported from Westerbork to the Death Camps in Germany and Poland.

a veteran', which was not a romantic date but an opportunity to talk with them about their experiences.

The theories of both Goffman (Burns, 1999; Goffman, 1956; Manning, 2007) on the ritualistic presentation of self and Barth (1969; Jenkins, 2014b) on group identification are helpful when analysing how the veterans in this study speak about these events. Goffman (1956) viewed the social world as a stage, in which selves are performed with the objective to receive a certain treatment from their audience. The performance can be adjusted as often as necessary, until the desired reaction is reached. Although the theory has received criticisms for being too simplistic, and even elite because of built-in biases regarding minorities presenting themselves in a hegemonic value system (Bastos & Bastos, 2010), I believe Goffman's stage provides a useful metaphor for how social groups try to influence what others think of them. In the case of veterans, the stage is first of all a means to make them visible to society in the way they want to be seen, and second, a way to communicate – even without words — why they deserve to be seen and appreciated. In collective performances, there can be threats such as group members who do not follow the script, which can endanger the reaction of the audience to the group as a whole, as is indeed the case for the veterans in this study. Another valuable aspect of Goffman's theory of self-presentation is the use of a substitute, something that already exists in the collective memories of the audience and relates to the impression the performers want to leave with the audience. In other words, a performance as an impression of the actual thing that exists in collective memory can be an effective way to reach the desired reaction. I interpret commemorations of WW2, often mentioned by the veterans who I interviewed as settings in which they express their veteran identity, as such a representation.

Barth (1969; 1992) relied on Goffman's work, while placing the focus on ethnic identity, instead of on performed selves. He described how ethnic identity is a performance. Jenkins (2014b) argued that this theory of ethnic identity can be applied to group identity in general, since both are constructed through interaction and by comparing similarities and contrasting differences. Group identity is constructed at the boundary of the group, facing outsiders. Interacting as a collective, however, requires internal group coordination. By articulating differences between the group and the others, and then interacting with the other, in-group members create group cohesion and make it meaningful to belong to this group. To do so with a certain purpose or interest, a group identity must be relevant. Group members also make sure that interaction with others takes place on their terms, to create an exchange in line with the effect they are trying to create. Identifying as an in-group member means accepting that other group members might judge your behaviour as inappropriate with regards to group norms, and that that you must adjust your behaviour accordingly (Barth, 1969; Jenkins, 2014c).

Text box 5.1 May 4th in Loenen

Every afternoon on May 4th a WW2 commemoration takes place at the National Cemetery in Loenen. Almost 4,000 victims of war are buried at this cemetery. Most of them died during WW2, varying from servicemen to resistance members and civilians. Since the 1980s, military personnel and civilians who died during a humanitarian or a peacekeeping mission have also been buried here, if they or their relatives desired. Several veterans mentioned visiting Loenen on May 4th when I asked them what they did to express that they are veterans. In 2019, I visited the ceremony myself and observed how groups of veterans arrived at the entrance of the graveyard. Many of them were wearing blue berets, some wore a waistcoat of the Veterans Motor Club or the Blue Helmets. The veterans greeted each other and their partners as friends who haven't met for a long time. The atmosphere was that of a reunion, a bit similar to what I had witnessed the times I was present at Veterans Day in The Hague.

Inside the graveyard, the formal programme was held, which consists of several components, all aiming to make war memories tangible for the audience, of which a majority was born in the decades after WW2. Also, connections to contemporary society were made, as the chairwoman made explicit several times how important it is to not judge one another and instead, to focus on what binds us together as a society. Veterans of missions other than WW2 were not mentioned during the programme, although they formally do belong to the groups commemorated on May 4th. Minister of Defence Ank Bijleveld made a speech in which she referred to the present-day military, and defined soldiers as 'people who dedicate themselves to others'. After the speeches that day, a minute's silence was held. Then, numerous wreaths were laid by different veterans associations and groups.

After this, visitors could walk around in the graveyard, where several artistic expressions were held, such as poetry recitations and theater performances. I searched for the blue berets and motorcycling outfits and found them near the newest graves at the cemetery, of soldiers who died during the ISAF mission in Afghanistan, the UNPROFOR mission in Former Yugoslavia, and the UNIFIL mission in Lebanon. About thirty veterans, of different ages, the youngest somewhere in their forties, started to line up. The ones in front were in official veterans uniforms, behind them some wore the outfit of the Young Veterans Association (an association which can be joined by veterans of UNIFIL and all missions that followed), and in the closing ranks there were some veterans in plain clothes. They started to march, led by the person up front who called out when to march, when to stand still, and when to salute the graves. The graves they saluted were placed in rows of five. The first salute was brought to a line of five graves consisting of three graves of the soldiers who fell during the ISAF mission and two graves of soldiers who died during the UNPROFOR mission. Then they marched to the path next to these graves and saluted five graves of UNIFIL veterans. After this salute, the veterans continued to march to the path next to that and saluted five graves of soldiers who died during the German attack in 1940. Then, they relaxed their faces and their bodies: the ceremony was over.

By saluting both the ten most recent graves and five graves of WW2, the veterans made the symbolic connection between their generations and the victims of the war most prominent in Dutch collective memory – WW2. Meanwhile, veterans were presenting themselves non-verbally as veterans to everyone attending this memorial by wearing veteran symbols, such as the uniform or the Veterans Motor Club waistcoat, by talking with each other and patting one another's backs before and after the ceremony, and by performing this military ritual of saluting the graves. There was a symbolic interaction at the boundary with civilians, who were present as onlookers and supporters — an interaction expressed visually but not verbally.

In this chapter, I elaborate why veterans chose to present themselves in different settings and thereby performed their group identity at the boundary of the group. I also go into what the group viewed as a threat to the performance. Indeed, not all informants presented themselves as veterans, since not everyone identified as veteran. This chapter focuses on Lebanon and Srebrenica veterans who did present themselves as veterans. Since few Uruzgan veterans presented themselves as veterans, I chose to include the ones not presenting as veterans and to elaborate on their perspectives.

5.1 PRESENTATION OF LEBANON VETERANS: WALKING A TIGHTROPE

As described in Chapter Three, the meaning of being a veteran for Lebanon veterans includes being injured, having done something exceptional, and being a loyal buddy. Chapter Four highlighted how Lebanon veterans felt underappreciated for their experiences shortly upon their return, and that about half of them believed that public attention and appreciation for the armed forces, veterans, and their missions had increased over the past decades. In this section, I demonstrate how their presentation of self focused on being seen, on raising public awareness of veterans even more. Playing a role in public rituals seemed to compensate for the perceived lack of attention or appreciation they experienced upon return from deployment. The public ceremonies also demonstrated veterans as people who made extraordinary sacrifices in service to their country. Of course, the ones for whom a veteran identity was not of much importance or salience did not present themselves as veterans. I focus here on the Lebanon veterans who did present themselves as veterans, as well as the comments of the whole group on how they thought veterans should express themselves towards a larger audience.

Performance: Having fun and increasing awareness

In this section, I first go into how Lebanon veterans presented themselves verbally, through giving lectures and the like. Then, I describe how they presented themselves nonverbally, via their presence at WW2 commemorations and at Veterans Day.

Verbal presentation

During lectures in classrooms, lecture rooms, during local May 4th commemorations and during so-called 'speed dating' interactions with visitors during May 5th liberation festivals, Lebanon veterans shared their deployment experience with a larger audience in a staged setting. By staged setting I mean that the interaction was not spontaneous: veterans prepared their story and thought about the message they wanted to communicate. The Lebanon veterans thought their story should reflect a realistic image of the

armed forces, since the suspension of conscription had decreased public familiarity with the armed forces. Lebanon veterans saw this as a means to enhance appreciation for Dutch veterans in general.

But this objective was unstated: Lebanon veterans did not articulate this in their presentations. Furthermore, Lebanon veterans felt their stories would best be presented with light heartedness in order not to shock the audience and to present themselves sympathetically. Telling and hearing the story should be 'fun' for both the veterans making speeches and public appearances as their audience. For instance, when Jan mentioned his guest lectures in schools and at Rotary Clubs, he said he did not find it important to specifically increase awareness of veterans' experiences during deployment. Instead, he gave presentations because he found it 'fun'. When I asked him about his most striking and difficult memories from the mission, he told me about a local boy who pointed a rifle at Jan's chest. Years later, he awoke from a nightmare about this event, realising only at that moment how dangerous the situation had been. When I asked for a positive memory, he told a story about receiving a request to marry a local girl. In the talks for the Rotary Clubs or at schools, however, he chose to relate the positive anecdote about the marriage proposal, while keeping silent about the boy with the rifle. When I asked him why, he said:

I think that is like 'sensation-seeking', like 'hear me out, oh, what I have been through'. Yes, I have been through that, but it does not change who I am (...). Then it would become too much of a cowboy-story. (...) I just tell what life was like there.

Jan adjusted his story to how he wanted to present himself to the audience: not as a cowboy or an attention seeker. He actively avoided the association with being in direct physical danger due to a weapon, which I interpret as avoiding to contribute to the view of veterans as traumatised or contaminated by war. By presenting unfamiliar, yet light and fun material, he believed he kept his story relatable, while highlighting some of the extraordinary circumstances in which he did his job. The goal was to increase knowledge of veterans and their missions, and to find some sympathy. Indeed, other Lebanon veterans stressed that when one tells the story of deployment, there should be some modesty in the way the personal stories are presented — it was important not to 'exaggerate' the deployment experiences. The deployment was extraordinary, and this could be illustrated by humorous, human, non-combat anecdotes, and eschewing stereotypes around war, violence, and veterans.

Symbolic interaction

Besides giving lectures on May 4th commemorations, these commemorations have strong ceremonial content, in which veterans embody a symbolic role. For instance, they are recognizable as veterans in their outer appearance, because of clothing and symbols such as the veteran insignia. Moreover, veterans often have a role in the ceremony, by laying wreaths, as in Loenen and often as well in local commemorations. Some Lebanon veterans joined the national commemorations in Amsterdam, where veterans of all missions form the honorary guard for the king and queen. While not verbalising their personal memories on all occasions, Lebanon veterans said they do think about their past during these ceremonies. They especially remember buddies who died during or after the mission, while also feeling sympathy for all who fell during WW2. Some saw their attendance in this role as a 'moral obligation' to the Ministry of Defence or to the people who died during recent missions. They explained their objective in attending these events as raising awareness that Dutch soldiers have given their lives in the decades after WW2 in the service of others.

Some Lebanon veterans also viewed their attendance at these ceremonies as a conversation starter between them and their civilian audience joining the memorial ceremony. For example, in Chapter Four, Jan described how children started a dialogue with him after the local commemoration. This was the most ideal outcome of the presentation in the eyes of Lebanon veterans. Another example was former corporal Walter looking forward to the unveiling of a WW2 monument in his village on May 4th, speaking wistfully about that event.

A wreath must be laid there, too. So yeah, maybe, I will be standing there. And then, after the ceremony, more and more people, with a cup of coffee and a piece of cake, come to you and ask: 'what did you do?' Asking me what kind of medals I wear, of what I have been through...

Walter hoped to create some interest in his story by fulfilling a role in the ceremony as veteran. Lebanon veterans also fulfilled a ceremonial role when joining the military parade in Wageningen on May 5th. There was room for interaction with the audience when they stood still. Most of them hoped the audience would express interest in where they were deployed and what they did — without moral judgment. But the most important effect, and one they could rely on, was to be seen and applauded by the audience. These rituals were ways to become visible and to communicate the veterans' extraordinary experience to civilians, even if a conversation may not take place. By presenting themselves with dignity as veterans at these important national rituals, Lebanon veterans emphasised their status as extraordinary citizens, people who deployed themselves for their nation.

Lebanon veterans who had joined the parade in Wageningen and the parade on Veterans Day, described the parade in Wageningen as 'more intimate' than the one in The Hague on Veterans Day. While not one of the Lebanon veterans doubted the rituals of May 4th and 5th, the Netherlands Veterans Day was sometimes questioned. Not everyone identifying as a veteran joined the parade on Netherlands Veterans Day. Those who did not join spoke of 'a vanity show', with a particular audience of people who feel self-important and are ingratiating themselves to public figures such as the Minister of Defence. They chose not to visit Netherlands Veterans Day at all or only the informal manifestation at the Malieveld, where they met their fellow veterans. The difference in importance between Netherlands Veterans Day and May 4th and 5th as perceived by veterans can be explained by the fact that the Netherlands Veterans Day has shallower historical roots than WW2 commemorations. Or to put it in Goffman's (1968) terms, to ensure a certain reaction, the difference between the two dates relates to something that is rooted in the collective memory. By presenting themselves as veterans on commemorations of a war rooted in collective memory, Lebanon veterans demonstrated that they know what war is, that they did something valuable for their country, and therefore deserve special public recognition. The audience then participates by paying respect and appreciation for securing their freedom. The Netherlands Veterans Day, on the other hand, has a different focus. Instead of WW2, it focuses on veterans themselves. As Lebanon veterans perceived civilians to know little of what non-WW2 veterans have done, this stage seems more ambiguous and dubious. Also, the focus on veterans themselves instead of the nation's suffering and freedom increases the chance of veterans being perceived as flaunting their veteran status, which Lebanon veterans in this study expressed wariness about. This makes the stage of Netherlands Veterans Day less appealing than the setting of May 4th and 5th.

Nevertheless, some of the Lebanon veterans did describe joining the parade on Netherlands Veterans Day as something that filled them with pride. Being applauded by the public during the parade made them feel recognised, honoured, and appreciated. Again, these veterans stressed that it is important not to take this parade 'too seriously' and to show the public that you are having fun. As Rudolf put it:

Some walk around with a stony face, and I think to myself: 'Don't do that.' You have to have a good time there, man, you have to smile, you have to shake hands with the kids who stand there. You know, in the old days, you used to be like that (...), 'make a fist of your face' they said, (...) all that rubbish, man, just enjoy it while you parade there. (...). You don't have to be so tough; a veteran is just a human being, too.

This attitude that Rudolf and others promoted, I argue, seeks to minimise the gap between the ones in the parade and the audience. It is comparable to what Jan did in his guest lectures. By this, these veterans enhanced the chance of being liked by the civilian public. Being seen as a person somewhere between the military hero and the happy civilian — in other words, an extraordinary citizen — seemed to be the true recognition and appreciation they were striving for.

Threats to collective performance

As Goffmann described, when there is a collective performance, there can be threats to its success. Barth (1969) referred to how group members can comment on and correct each other's behaviour when this behaviour does not conform with the message the collective wishes to convey. Reflecting this perspective, Lebanon veterans commented on fake veterans, veterans making up stories, veterans who exaggerate their stories, and veterans who are just 'too negative' in general. These groups threatened the light-hearted presentation that Lebanon veterans sought to project, and could lead to misrepresentations, and contribute to public misunderstanding.

The first group, fake veterans, were a matter of great concern to Lebanon veterans in this study. A recurring tale among them is that on Veterans Day, people dress up as veterans, wearing fake medals or medals that they could not possibly have earned since they were not even born at the time of that mission. Although I have not spoken to one Lebanon veteran who physically encountered a fake veteran, and most accounts seemed to originate as hearsay, fake veterans were spoken of as if they showed up regularly. Fake veterans threatened the real veterans' sincerity and exclusivity in such a way that one informant even proposed that the Veterans Institute should have their own 'stolen valour'²⁶ department where they can check if one is really the veteran he claims to be.²⁷ When I asked the Lebanon veterans what reasons one could have to pretend to be a veteran, they mentioned receiving attention or receiving the special treatment veterans receive. Here, they explicated the desired reaction to the presentation as a veteran: getting attention for being special in a positive way.

Second, 'real' veterans narrating experiences that are not theirs, were seen as a threat to collective performance. Sometimes, the interviewed veteran acknowledged that forming false memories may not even be a conscious process. It might be that in the decades following deployment, some veterans have truly come to believe the story they heard from someone else as if they were there. Yet, although more mildly treated than

26 The expression 'stolen valor' was adopted from the U.S.A., where it was introduced by Vietnam veteran B.G. Burkett (Burkett & Whitley, 1998).

27 Around 2015-2016, there was a Dutch Facebook page where veterans could report persons under the suspicion of being a fake veteran. On this page, there was little to no online mercy for the ones getting exposed. At the time of writing, 2021, the page no longer exists. The American versions of Stolen Valor are still on Facebook.

the fake veterans, some Lebanon veterans saw other veterans telling stories that were not their own as a serious threat to the sincerity of the veterans' performance. These veterans stressed it to be important to increase society's knowledge of missions with one's actual experience and if everyone can just make an impressive story their own, this diminishes the credibility of the whole group.

In the eyes of the interviewed Lebanon veterans, a third threat came from the veterans who exaggerate their experiences to get financial compensation or attention. Receiving attention for exaggerated stories was generally viewed as unacceptable. Some Lebanon veterans thought that veterans who exaggerate their experiences do so to receive financial compensation from the state. This was rejected even more firmly than just exaggeration for the sake of receiving attention. Again, sincerity was emphasised as important in the presentation of self. Suspicions of inconsistent or insincere performances threatened the credibility of the performance of the entire group.

Summary Lebanon veterans: A performance well balanced

The collective performance of Lebanon veterans took place at WW2 commemorations as well as on the Netherlands Veterans Day. Lebanon veterans seemed to perceive rituals around WW2 commemorations as more genuine and expressed more mixed feelings about the Netherlands Veterans Day. This could be explained by the fact that the Netherlands Veterans Day developed more recently, and the focus during WW2 events was on the broader society, instead of on solely veterans.

Indeed, Lebanon veterans chose to present themselves as human beings standing between the wider society and the armed forces, carrying out military customs in a light-hearted way. The performance appeared to be a thin line to balance on. In their presentation as veterans, they distinguished themselves from civilians, yet did not wish to be seen so much as servicemen, and fall into perceived stereotypes. Therefore, in the personal presentations, the emphasis was not on the stories revealing threat or violence, but on daily life during deployment and local cultural customs. The desired response from others was that the audience would acknowledge veterans and express interest in their experiences without judgement — in other words, non-judgmental public attention, even appreciation. However, this motive was not allowed to be too visible, or too consciously cultivated: Lebanon veterans often stressed that they do not 'flaunt' their veteran status. The presentation as a veteran should not too obviously serve to draw attention and it was perceived as counterproductive if this goal becomes too apparent.

Hence, the group committed itself to sincerity, and this went further than just being sincere personally to curating and emphasising human, down-to-earth, light-hearted narratives. Even if deployment stories were true, there seemed to be a reluctance against those stories that confirm certain stereotypes, such as 'cowboy stories'. After all, the goals of the presentation should not be to shock the audience, but to increase knowledge

among the audience about veterans and their missions, which in their view are not accurately reflected by the blood and gore stories that get undue attention. In order to keep the audience interested and well-informed, the Lebanon veterans believed that they must put in an effort to maintain a well-balanced collective performance.

5.2 PRESENTATION OF SREBRENICA VETERANS: CHANGING OTHERS' MINDS AS A MISSION

As we saw in Chapter Three, being seen as moral actors, and as having done something for the greater good, was important in identification processes among Srebrenica veterans, as were injuries following deployment. In Chapter Four, I described how the Srebrenica veterans often felt judged and dismissed as cowards. The way Srebrenica veterans present themselves to the outside world was therefore characterised by appealing to moral values, by emphasising their contributions to society. The importance of working together instead of being individually minded was stressed. The interviewed Srebrenica veterans who presented themselves as veterans in public settings were very aware of their reputation after the mission and sought to improve this image.

Performance: Moral conscience and dignity

In this section, I start with the personal narrative as a presentation of self in guest lectures, followed by the collective performance in ritualised settings, namely WW2 commemorations and the Netherlands Veterans Day. Then, I go into two stages in which Dutchbat III veterans appeared — namely, their collective charge against the state, and a theatrical performance. Not every Srebrenica veteran presented themselves as a veteran. The ones not presenting themselves as veterans were the ones not viewing themselves as veterans or not feeling much affinity with other veterans, as described in Chapter Three.

Verbal presentation

Several Srebrenica veterans had told their deployment story as part of education for children in schools or museums. They described how they aim to tell their audience the 'true story' in their guest lectures. By showing what it 'was really like' in Srebrenica, they hoped to improve the public image of the Dutchbat soldiers. They proudly told me how students become quiet during their story, which was interpreted as the pupils being impressed. This was the desired reaction; they wanted students to be fascinated and to think about the freedom and luxury in their lives that they may take for granted. The ultimate goal was to make them realise that living in a free democracy is not guaranteed and that sacrifices had been made and were still being made to secure liberty in the

Netherlands and other countries. This resembled the message given on May 4th and 5th: remembering and appreciating the soldiers who risked or gave their lives for 'our' freedom. Srebrenica veterans telling their story in guest lectures found it very important to get this message across to Dutch youth. Also, they wanted to show them that knowing right from wrong is not always as easy as these students may imagine. Some veterans described how they feel their talks have changed some lives. These Srebrenica veterans saw themselves as trying to help others see the broader picture, highlighting only incidentally their own noble sacrifices.

Besides presenting what they saw as the truth, another crucial aspect in their lectures was the value of being a team player. This part of the story emphasised group solidarity over individual interest. Esther shared her deployment story with youth delinquents.

I felt really surprised by their interest. (...) I really thought 'I can mean something to them, show them something.' (...) I can show them that it is important to be part of a group, instead of trying to fight on your own. (...) I have shown them it is not about the money and about wanting to have new gadgets all the time, instead it is about togetherness.

Srebrenica veterans wanted their audience to receive the message that it is good to work together, something they learned while being in the military. Implicitly, they showed their moral values.

Symbolic interaction

Similar to Lebanon veterans, Srebrenica veterans mentioned the national commemoration in Amsterdam, local May 4th commemorations, the memorial at the graveyard in Loenen, and the parade in Wageningen as activities in which they expressed their veteran status. First, they described their attendance at these events as impressive moments to memorise fallen fellow soldiers and all others who suffered in the Srebrenica area. Second, they felt honoured to be part of a national tradition in this way. And third, it made them visible to society as veterans. As Esther told me about the local May 4th commemoration ritual:

We have claimed our spot within the event, so now there is a veteran on the May 4th committee. Our expertise as veterans, as servicepersons, we can use to make an organised ritual. (...) We now walk along with the silent walk, we stand in a representative way behind the graves of resistance fighters, the allied soldiers and others who have died in the war. We also stand at monuments in the city.

She described how the local veterans' involvement in this ritual in their own town has improved the ceremony — she calls it the 'Dam in miniature'. She was convinced that more civilian inhabitants attend this event since the veterans have become involved, now that they have an elegant ceremony to watch.

On May 5th, some informants joined the parade in Wageningen. The veterans noticed a growing respect for Srebrenica veterans, especially in Wageningen. They felt seen and appreciated. In these WW2 commemorations, the desired reaction from the audience was to be seen and to feel respected. I interpret the rituals that are related to commemorating WW2 as suitable stages to receive this reaction, since they symbolised both a shared agreement on right and wrong, as well as suffering in war circumstances. Both effects supported Srebrenica veterans to present themselves the way they viewed themselves: as helpers and as injured veterans.

Joining the parade on Netherlands Veterans Day was discussed with more mixed feelings. Some Srebrenica veterans were very enthusiastic about the fact that their group of veterans joining the parade is still growing. The quantity of Srebrenica veterans joining the parade mattered to them. I interpret this as relating to the central message they seek to convey: namely, that making an effort as a collective is a good thing to do. I have also spoken to Srebrenica veterans who felt that Netherlands Veterans Day is too much of a show, which they just cannot take seriously. They mocked the 'big shots' (*'bobo's'* in Dutch) who walk around on Netherlands Veterans Day while not knowing anything about the reality of deployment or even military service. Hence, the type of audience is important in determining whether a stage is worthy of the veterans' performance.

Charge

The charge against the state of Dutchbat III veterans can also be interpreted as a presentation of self. Rehabilitation of their public image was the main motive of the charge against the state, a juridical process started by some Dutchbat III veterans after the Minister of Defence said in her speech on the Netherlands Veterans Day that Dutchbat in Srebrenica was tasked with a 'mission impossible'. In reaction to this, a group of Dutchbat III veterans charged the state to pay them a 'symbolic amount' as compensation for their suffering, mainly caused by being seen as (partly) responsible for the genocide and for being abandoned by their own government that never stood up for them in the media. I interpret this charge against the state as a way of presenting themselves symbolically, since the objective was to influence how Srebrenica veterans were perceived by the public.

Eventually, veterans believed the case should demonstrate that Srebrenica veterans were not to blame for what happened in the Safe Area. Instead, the case should explicate how supervisory powers such as the state should be held responsible for what happened. The veterans to whom I spoke and who were supporting this charge stressed

that they have no financial motive, but instead sought public recognition for their contributions to society and a rehabilitation of their image. This was shown by the group deferring the charges when the government announced to conduct a large-scale study into Dutchbat III veterans, mainly directed at how the deployment and what happened afterwards affected their health and well-being (resulting in Olff et al., 2020). This further suggested that the main motive might not even be official compensation per se, but receiving attention for personal experiences, and being seen and heard by powerful decision makers. Like the guest lectures, it was also directed at getting the 'true story' out, to help reshape public opinion, or at least to offer the sincere, authentic, and neglected perspective of veterans themselves to the public. Eventually, both attention for their stories and letting the truth be heard, could result in the desired rehabilitation.

Theatre

The last stage on which Srebrenica veterans performed was an actual stage in a theatre, with an audience. In autumn 2018, Dutchbat III veterans carried out a play called 'Dark Numbers', created by Bosnian dramaturge Tea Tupajić. Five veterans appeared on stage, sharing anecdotes with the audience about their time in Srebrenica, using objects, body language, soundscapes and music to make their stories even more tangible. I attended the play in October 2018. In the play, the veterans took turns in telling their version of the same story.

Their stories were impressive and emotional, yet there was room for some humour. Less heroic or even morally questionable deeds were not neglected: one veteran recalled pushing one local woman away with her weapon. This woman fell to the ground, which caused other women lined up behind her to topple as well, like dominos. This made the veteran narrator laugh at the time, while during the play in 2018 she acknowledged there was nothing funny about it. Another veteran told his story as if he told it to his own children. This story is about the children he met in Srebrenica, who were of the same age as his children at the time of the story. In an especially striking scene the veterans did nothing but rip off the packaging around candy bars and eat them in silence, savouring the taste. They expressed the joy they felt in eating something like that, after months of canned food, while earlier they described local people looking for food at garbage belts.

At one point in the show, one of the veterans told us about the time that he was driving around in the area on patrol when he saw a woman walking barefoot in the mountains. She had to walk to the next village, while being exhausted and wounded in her face. She asked him and his buddy for help. They decided not to help her, because that action was not approved by their Rules of Engagement. They could only report to have witnessed her walking there, asking for help. She continued her path and during the play, the veteran wondered whether and in what state she would have made it to her destination. He also wondered whether he made the right decision not to help her.

Then, without warning, the lights were turned on in the audience, ending our position as audience members in comfortable dark seats. The narrating veteran asked the audience:

What do you think?

Another veteran added:

Yeah, what do you think? Do you think we did the right thing? And are you going to tell us now, face-to-face, or wait until the show is over, to judge us behind our backs, while sipping a drink with your friends?

The veteran who told us about the incident asked us again:

Did I do the right thing?

The first reaction came from a boy in his late teens or early twenties who answered the question affirmatively. After all, he said, the veteran was there in his role as part of the military, and as a soldier he did what he was ordered to do. The veteran on stage objected that from a humanitarian point of view, he did not do the right thing. Then, others from the audience reacted. They all acknowledged both sides of the story, it was justified from a military point of view, but reprehensible from a humanitarian point of view. Some expressed to understand why the veteran struggled with this dilemma. One person said that the people designing a mission in this context and with this mandate were the ones to blame. This in turn was received with some nodding by the veterans on stage. Indeed, the play ended with an indictment against the Dutch government for putting soldiers in this position.

In this play, Dutchbat III veterans first described vividly, supported by sounds and music, how the reality of deployment felt to them. Yet, they were not performing as the soldiers they were in 1995, but as the veterans they were in 2018, by talking to their children, morally judging their own behaviour, and questioning their own deeds. Here, it was obvious how the group was allowing, even asking, the audience to judge them, but judge them in an informed way, with a fuller sense of the context and complexities of different dimensions of the story. This illustrated how the moral judgments that had been made throughout the years by the public fed the expectations that Srebrenica veterans had of their audience. Also, it demonstrated the kind of interaction at the boundary, which consisted of questions of right and wrong. In this case, these questions could be answered on the group's terms. The particular incident to react on was chosen by them, and it was emphasised that the audience owed them a reaction, or was at least strongly encouraged to respond. With the whole play directed at the human side of war,

filled with emotion and reflection, the audience was enabled to offer a supportive and understanding reaction.

Threats to collective performance

Having moral values and acting in the benefit of the collective was vital to how Srebrenica veterans wanted to represent themselves to the public, a delicate matter concerning their mission's context and public reputation. Therefore, the veterans preferred a direct interaction with others, without interference from the media, which they felt misrepresented veterans' experiences, whether out of ignorance or by sensationalising stories in order to sell newspapers or generate clicks. Therefore, veterans viewed the media with wariness when trying to tell their side of the story of Srebrenica. Veterans experienced that it is harder to control the message you want to bring across when a newspaper is the mediator and vehicle of expression. Therefore, what other Srebrenica veteran told in the media was watched with suspicion. Srebrenica veterans seemed critical of each other for being too much in the media, accusing Srebrenica veterans who have appeared in the media repeatedly to be craving attention. Often, individual stories in the media were perceived to focus too much on individual suffering and less on the veteran being someone working hard for the greater good. It became clear from the accounts of the Srebrenica veterans that they thought the topic of mental health should not be avoided, yet it should not be the main focus as it portrays the veterans too much as victims, instead of helpers.

Therefore, 'negative' veterans were often perceived as detracting from the message of the collective performance, and when they received media attention they put this message in jeopardy. Virtually all Srebrenica veterans who I interviewed referred to other veterans who could be too negative and behaving in ways they should not. 'Negative' behaviours include: alcoholism, sitting on the couch waiting for respect, lying, taking no responsibility over one's life, whining, complaining, individualism and having a partner who thinks their veteran is more exceptional than the group. These were direct threats to the message the Srebrenica veterans in this study aimed to impress on their audience: that of the veteran with a moral conscience who acts for the benefit of the collective.

Summary Srebrenica veterans: Communicating moral dignity

By performing as described above, Srebrenica veterans showed that they were the opposite of how they felt 'the media' had portrayed them: as lazy, cowardly, and even malevolent soldiers. The presentation of self among Srebrenica veterans was clearly linked to the image of veterans as helpers, as demonstrating the aim to do the right thing for the benefit of the collective, while also describing how moral values can shift under the extreme pressure of war and a 'mission impossible'. The desired reaction was to make the audience think about their own moral values and to consider their judge-

ments in the context in which soldiers found themselves. WW2 commemorations, which emphasised moral values and self-sacrifice for the greater good were suitable settings to seek interaction with civilians and to communicate this, even without words. In the end, Srebrenica veterans were aiming to restore their morality and dignity.

This was also shown by the distinctive setting of the charge against the state, in which Srebrenica veterans presented themselves as noble helpers stabbed in the back and scapegoated for what was actually to blame on supervisory powers such as the Dutch government and the UN, the individuals and institutions that made the decisions to send in peacekeeping forces, and created the policies under which soldiers operated. While often having the best personal intentions, these soldiers were sent on an impossible mission. One of their goals was to receive recognition for their suffering from both the supervisory powers and the public at large. The desired effect of this attention was expected to be a kind of rehabilitation of the soldiers of Dutchbat III. In this performance, the images of the veteran as helper together with the image of the injured veteran came to the fore.

As with the Lebanon veterans, this collective performance sought a tricky balance. It aimed to tell authentic stories and to present veterans as loyal and social beings, with a moral conscience, in contrast with the image veterans believe is reflected in the media. But at the same time, this authenticity should focus on certain kinds of stories that promoted particular values and images. There were some unwritten rules regarding the appropriate ways to receive attention for your story, for instance, such as not victimising oneself or emphasising powerlessness. Also, one should not be in contact with the media too often. During ritualised performances on the Netherlands Veterans Day or WW2 commemorations, and especially during guest lectures or theatre performances, there was no mediator between the narrator and audience. The performers oversaw how they presented themselves — they had full control and were the authors of their own narrative. Therefore, these events were preferred over sharing the story in the media, where one relinquished control to writers, and editors, who often worked with their own biases and preconceived storylines.

All in all, Srebrenica veterans have a performance directed at restoring their public image from cowards or brutes to people who meant well but got caught up in UN bureaucracy. They were quite eager to communicate this to their audience, as was shown by distinctive staged settings, such as a theatre performance and, more recently, a

documentary (Verbraak, 2020).²⁸ They wanted the public to see them in a different light. Instead of passing moral judgments, they wanted the public to respect them and maybe even admire them. Or at least, they wanted their audience to see the Srebrenica veterans beyond the moral stigma they carry. Hence, the ultimate goal of this presentation of self was to change the image of Srebrenica veterans for the better. It was aimed at restoring the damage inflicted on them in the period shortly after their return to the Netherlands. The Srebrenica veterans presenting themselves were demanding to be seen and heard, to be recognised for their morally good motivations and characteristics, and for the fact that these motivations can become a burden when being unable to do the right thing due to rules and regulations created by more powerful actors. Above all, they wanted the truth as they saw it to be widely known and acknowledged.

5.3 PRESENTATION OF URUZGAN VETERANS: STAYING AWAY FROM THE BOUNDARY

In Chapter Three, it was demonstrated how Uruzgan veterans in this study still identified with the military and were somewhat hesitant to identify as veterans — a veteran in their eyes was either an old man or someone seeking attention. Also, as described in Chapter Four, the perception that the Dutch public does ‘not really care’ made publicly expressing their veteran status less attractive. Therefore, few Uruzgan veterans in this study presented themselves as veterans in public rituals. One of them did so occasionally, during a local commemoration of WW2 on May 4th. The other one, struggling with mental health issues, was highly active in the veteran world. Thus, the majority of the Uruzgan veterans I spoke to chose not to present themselves as veterans in public settings. In this section, instead of focusing on the presentation of self as a veteran, I also discuss the motivations for not joining such performances.

Performance: Who is watching anyway?

One Uruzgan veteran I spoke to gave guest lectures in universities and municipalities. Since he suffered from mental health problems, he gave a guest lecture to psychology students several times. He said that at first, he just told his deployment story, but after the student reactions, it became clear they were interested in how his life unfolded after

28 In this documentary, several veterans deployed in Dutchbat III were interviewed about their experiences in Srebrenica. The tripartite documentary was broadcasted on national television on prime time during three consecutive days in July 2020, 25 years after the fall of the enclave. The Netherlands Veterans Institute collected the reactions it received after the broadcasts. Many viewers who wrote a reaction showed a shift in opinion, namely, from judging Dutchbat III soldiers to feeling for them. Some even apologised for how they judged Dutchbat III in 1995 (Netherlands Veterans Institute, 2020a).

returning, how he experienced the healthcare he received and what factors helped or hindered his recovery. Hence, he adjusted his talk to the expectations of the audience. In other words, he was not showing himself to get people interested in his story but was presenting himself to cater to his audience. He assumed most civilians did not know much about veterans, and when he told his story he invites people to become aware of veterans in their social environment. Hence, his presentation of self was directed at raising awareness and knowledge on veterans in society.

However, as said, most Uruzgan veterans did not take part in the staged settings to present themselves as veterans as the other two groups did. They may join WW2 rituals, but generally do not present themselves as veterans on the spot. The one veteran who mentioned he did so, said his motive was showing himself as a young veteran. The most important audience to which this veteran was presenting himself did not consist of civilians but of fellow young veterans attending the commemoration. He wanted to set an example for them, as he sensed most did not show themselves as veterans out of some sort of shyness or shame. The desired reaction was for them to consider identifying, to make themselves visible in this ritual of commemoration. The effect he was aiming for, on the longer term, was that both audience and veterans no longer saw the veteran as an old man but were aware that a veteran can be relatively young.

One of the Uruzgan veterans joined the parade on the Netherlands Veterans Day with the Veterans Search Team delegation. Concerning the rest of the informants, when talking about the Netherlands Veterans Day, there appeared to be a sentiment of not wanting to make a fool out of themselves, parading along. The same feeling of diffidence the veteran joining May 4th described when talking about fellow young veterans appeared to play a role here. Michael put it this way:

I do not care so much about this external recognition, yet. Maybe that is a phase, I don't know. But I do not feel called to march along with a pin on in a parade, I do not feel that. Maybe it has to do with feeling a bit embarrassed. Many friends are still in service and then you walk there with your thing on. You know...

This citation illustrates how presenting as a veteran for Uruzgan veterans meant acknowledging your military time is behind them and this acknowledgement felt uncomfortable for them. This connects to the image of the veteran as an old man. Both identifying with the military, as many Uruzgan veterans did, and with being young, stood in the way of identifying as veterans and therefore presenting themselves as such.

The result of the presentation on the Netherlands Veterans Day, to be seen by the public as veterans, was an undesirable effect for Uruzgan veterans. They felt a bit embarrassed to fall under this category already at a young age. Meeting buddies on this day

who were still in service almost seemed like losing face. By walking along as veterans, they demonstrated they did not belong in the military anymore. It seemed as if they feared becoming the 'useless citizens' they spoke of when in service — parading along asking for recognition, however unable to come into action and to be of use for the military. Most of them did not single out the option that one day they would join the parade on the Netherlands Veterans Day. However, they would only do so when they 'have grey hair' or would be less busy with their work and family. However, at the time of the interviews, the effect of showing themselves as veterans, namely receiving interest, recognition, and even respect from the audience, were not the rewards the Uruzgan veterans desired, as many of the interviewed Uruzgan veterans stated they did not need that recognition.

Nevertheless, some implied they might like to receive recognition; however, they did not see it as a possible outcome of these presentation rituals. In former corporal Barry's succinct formulation:

Nobody [in the Netherlands] really cares.

Therefore, for him, to visit a Veterans Day would feel silly, as if he was performing in an empty house. He was not the only Uruzgan veteran who felt this way: the attention the public gives to veterans on Veterans Day, did not feel real or sincere to them, since everyday interactions had demonstrated that civilians do not know much about their mission or the military, do not care, or even judge them for being ex-soldiers.

Hence, the majority of the veterans I spoke to talked about 'marching along' in the parade on the Netherlands Veterans Day as something that you just do not do. Asking for respect in an obvious way, as with the other two groups, was rejected. As described in Chapter Three, some but certainly not all Uruzgan veterans felt that fellow veterans who 'have not been through much' often seek attention. The ones joining the parade on the Netherlands Veterans Day, or showing themselves in the media, are sometimes viewed as veterans who are overstating their experiences. Uruzgan veterans thought that asking for respect is something soldiers should not do, since they have proved themselves in combat and do not need others — who do not know much of what combat entails — recognising their worth. They knew for themselves how they performed, what was good about it, and what could have been better. They experienced the military occupation as a job filled with learning opportunities, which has helped them grow as people. Former NCO Wouter, for example, reflected:

I did my job. So, do I have to demand recognition and appreciation for that from everyone for the rest of my life? Nah, I don't think so!

Other Uruzgan veterans looked at the active veterans in more mild ways. They indicated to understand that some veterans may 'need that', and maybe someday they themselves will, too. When talking about Lebanon and Srebrenica veterans, it appeared that the interviewed Uruzgan veterans viewed these two groups with empathy. They thought these two groups had a harder time than they had, since Lebanon and Srebrenica veterans experienced much more powerlessness during deployment. Another reason they mentioned for being worse off than Uruzgan veterans was that there was much less known about PTSD back then, and veterans' health care was much less systemised than at the time of the deployment to Uruzgan. Uruzgan veterans saw these aspects combined as possible reasons why Lebanon and Srebrenica veterans were much more involved in the presentation of themselves as veterans. Hence, there seemed to exist an underlying assumption among Uruzgan veterans that unanswered needs and powerlessness were justified reasons to present themselves as veterans. For now, Uruzgan veterans found recognition among each other, as described in Chapter Three and within themselves, as described in Chapter Three and Four. Civilians seemed not to be a priority group to receive recognition from at the moment of interviewing.

Moving back and forth

I noticed backstage some signs of change concerning the presentation as veteran among Uruzgan veterans. For example, one Uruzgan veteran told me that he decided to cooperate with an interview, since it was just for a study, and there was no intention to publish his personal story with his picture in the veterans magazine, *Checkpoint*. He stated that he would feel uncomfortable with that kind of personal attention. However, only a few months later, an interview with him, including a picture, was published in a national newspaper with a much larger audience than *Checkpoint*. This incident confirmed a lingering feeling I had when interviewing most of the Uruzgan veterans, as there seems to be a back-and-forth movement from not needing the attention to longing for recognition. Partly, the absence of interaction at the boundary of the group can be explained by not viewing themselves and not (yet) wanting to be seen as veterans. However, there is more complexity to this matter, as Uruzgan veterans claimed not to want to attract too much attention, not to need recognition, but somewhere they also felt mistreated by the lack of interest they experienced.

Consider, for instance, this part of the conversation I had with Kevin. He suggested that on the Netherlands Veterans Day, every veteran should display the national flag. This would make veterans more visible to society. He believed it would function as a conversation starter for civilians. When I said I thought this might be a good suggestion, he started to laugh and trivialise:

Yeah, no, well, look, I am just saying something. If you want to make [veterans] a subject of discussion within society or... well, empathy, that is such a strong word, but if you want to accomplish something, you have to make it debatable. And if it is not there, it is not debatable. If it is not visible, then whom should you talk to, if you want to ask something? If you are interested, at least. But in the Netherlands, [the visibility of veterans] is really small, let me put it like that. And for me, it is... I think it is plenty. It's all right with me.

YR: Yeah? Because I was indeed wondering, would you find it desirable, when...

Kevin, interrupting: I would display the flag.

Hence, Kevin first advocated for more visibility of veterans, then downplayed his own suggestion, immediately followed by some need to have a conversation about him being a veteran. Then, he blamed Dutch customs and cultural context for the lack of visibility of veterans in society, and he presented himself as being at peace with that. However, when I wanted to ask him whether he thought more visibility would be desirable, he seemed to have anticipated my thoughts, and interrupted me by making clear that he would want to do something about veteran's visibility in society, and therefore his own presentation as a veteran.

Continuing the comparison with the stage, behind the scenes, Uruzgan veterans appeared to want to perform but were also reluctant. They had not yet identified their talent, honed their narrative, or interacted with the public, and so expressed uncertainty and doubt about the audience, which might be hostile or uninterested, and their ex-colleagues, who could whisper disapprovingly about their performance. More importantly, the role they had to play did not fit them yet, so they did not see themselves giving a convincing performance. All of this complicated their presentation of self in such ways that they often decided not to perform at all.

Summary Uruzgan veterans: Autonomous ex-soldiers not showing up (yet?)

A large majority of the Uruzgan veterans in this study did not participate in ritualised presentation of self as veterans. Some Uruzgan veterans disapproved of the veterans who did present themselves, while others acknowledged they might need that for good reason, as they had experienced powerlessness during their missions and lack of healthcare afterwards. Uruzgan veterans implied that the need to participate in pre-

sentation rituals is higher among veterans who have been deployed in unfavourable circumstances.

One of the Uruzgan veterans I interviewed had joined May 4th commemorations and said he did so because he wanted to set an example for other young veterans, who maybe would want to join as well, but felt some hesitation. So, his presentation of self was in the first place directed at co-veterans, who he wanted to join these rituals for a second purpose — namely, being recognised by the civilian audience.

Most interviewed Uruzgan veterans did not visit Netherlands Veterans Day in the Hague, let alone join the parade. There are multiple factors that explained this. First, this seemed to result partly from social taboo, as parading on Netherlands Veterans Day was viewed as something you just do not do. Second, the Uruzgan veterans in this study claimed not to need the recognition that might follow from the presentation as veterans. Third, they associated the parade with an activity for old men, and therefore did not identify with this ritual. And last but certainly not least, they did not think actual recognition was a possible response from the audience. All four aspects led Uruzgan veterans not to participate much in the collective presentation as veterans. Their identification seemed to rely too heavily on the military to make it possible or even desirable to present themselves as in-between the military and civilian worlds.

It is possible that with time this might change, and the way they can present themselves as veterans to civilians will become clearer as time between the service and the present increases and the veterans age themselves. Recent stories about what has gone wrong in Uruzgan (Broere, 2020; Van der Ziel, 2020), as well as the court case against the state of the Netherlands because of civil deaths during the Battle for Chora, might change Uruzgan veterans' public image and change the need among Uruzgan veterans to be recognised, attended to, and respected.

5.4 COMPARING THE PRESENTATION AND PERFORMANCE OF THREE VETERAN GROUPS

This chapter elaborated on how veterans presented themselves and how they interacted with others. The veterans presenting themselves did so through interaction rituals at the border of the group, as Barth (1969; Jenkins, 2014b) put it, where they sought the attention and judgment of others. In Goffman's words, they morally appealed to the audience to be treated in a way they deserved relative to their performance (Burns, 1999; Goffman, 1956; Manning, 2007).

Similarities: Stages, desire for long term effects, and the importance of honesty

The veterans presenting themselves as veterans referred to similar stages on which they presented themselves. WW2 rituals turned out to be important contexts in which veterans expressed their identification as veterans. In these contexts, they had the opportunity to locate themselves in a national tradition. During WW2 commemorations, it was clear that violence is unacceptable; however, it can be required to defeat an enemy. Heroic deeds and sacrifices of good people are narrated and commemorated at these memorials. Veterans taking a visible and ceremonial role in these events demonstrate their willingness to fight for a cause and to make sacrifices for that cause. The message communicated here is that veterans have done something exceptional for a morally justified cause. During these occasions, instead of being confronted with judgments about their specific mission, they follow in the footsteps of resistance fighters and soldiers who took part in WW2, a war that had clear wrong and right sides. Here, they make use of a setting that is already known to society, the representations of what is in the collective memory (Goffman, 1968). By this, they make their performance accessible and easier to understand for civilians. Also, in this context, the focus is not on them but on society as a whole, living in liberty. Freedom is what is honoured here, and the veterans play a visible role in it, demonstrating their effort for peace and stabilisation all around the world.

Interestingly, the day that focuses primarily on honouring veterans, the Netherlands Veterans Day, is viewed with mixed feelings. This event seems less embedded in society than WW2 commemorations and celebrations. The ritual of performance is clear during the Netherlands Veterans Day, but the type of audience is not. Veterans seem to be confused about who they are parading for. Is it for civilians, each other, the king, or the 'big shots'? On the other hand, the parade in Wageningen on May 5th, due to its deeper historical roots, has a clearer connection to and resonance with society, and incorporates veterans in a broader societal narrative. The Netherlands Veterans Day formally honours every veteran who sacrificed to secure peace and safety, and illustrates this with the stories of veterans themselves. However, these stories are far more diverse and less known to the Dutch public than stories about WW2. The latter are taught in schools and have been part of educational programmes for decades now. Since the public is already familiar with these stories, placing their experiences in this WW2 tradition makes veterans feel they have to explain less in order to be recognised. From their position during the ritual, they already show themselves as a special part of society because they fought for liberation from a well-known enemy, and struggled to secure freedom for the nation. By contrast, the Netherlands Veterans Day is a relatively young tradition, and is associated with less known wars and conflicts. But it might gain wider recognition and appeal over time, as it integrates in the collective memory of society. After all, sharing personal memories with the public can transform collective memory (Halbwachs, 1992

[1954]). Nevertheless, the Netherlands Veterans Day is still also seen as a valuable moment of the year to show oneself as a veteran. The desired reaction in both WW2 commemorations and Netherlands Veterans Day is for people to see the veterans and show a genuine interest in their experiences, withholding negative judgments. The effect of this reaction in the longer term might be increased knowledge of veterans in society and thereby less stereotyping of and more appreciation for veterans in general.

This is an important addition to the presentation of self among veterans: whereas Goffmann's theory suggested a direct reaction from an audience, veterans in this study were more concerned with creating a longer-term effect. In the words of Barth, the interest that was at stake while interacting at the boundary, was spreading more knowledge in society about veterans and their missions, resulting in greater societal recognition and appreciation. Even the one Uruzgan veteran who presented himself as a veteran on May 4th did so in order to create an effect: to have other young veterans follow his example in the following years. So, the goal of the veterans' performance was not only to seek applause or elicit conversations; they also aimed to create a lasting impact on the way others view veterans.

Since this presentation as a veteran is a long-term investment in reaching the objective of appreciation, veterans were often very conscious of the behaviour of their fellow veterans in how it might affect this objective. The message they wanted to get across was balanced and not too obviously solicitous of appreciation. Performances should always be authentic, and honesty was highly valued. This was visible in the weariness that Lebanon veterans demonstrated when it came to concern over supposed fake veterans and veterans exaggerating their experiences for special personal attention. It was also visible in the accounts of Srebrenica veterans who wanted to communicate to the public their experiences in their own voices, what they saw as the truth about the conflict. It was even visible in the accounts of Uruzgan veterans not wanting to perform, since presenting themselves as veterans did not apply to their view of their authentic self. By being honest, telling the truth or not showing up on the public scene, veterans in all three groups demonstrated their authenticity, a positive moral value in itself (Grauel, 2016).

To ensure this authenticity, interaction between veterans and civilians about what it means to be a veteran should be made in a direct manner. Letting the media present their stories was often undesirable since this made it harder to control the focus of the veterans' message to civilians. Srebrenica veterans in particular had become wary of media involvement. Therefore, the media, although providing an opportunity to make oneself visible to a large audience, were nevertheless looked upon with distrust. A preferred way to reach the civilian audience was through guest lectures, in which the veteran chose how to tell his or her personal story. Here, authenticity of the story can be guaranteed by the speaker.

Differences: Participation in performance, objectives, and time

The most striking difference between the three groups when looking at how they presented themselves as veterans is that the participation of Uruzgan veterans is quite low. Most Uruzgan veterans were reluctant to show themselves as veterans at public settings. They felt unable to influence the public's ignorance. If we follow Barth (1969, see also Jenkins, 2014b), an explanation for this difference is that the effects following from performing the veteran identity were not perceived as an essential need by the Uruzgan veterans. So, the interest at stake was dismissed by the group as something of potential value. As a consequence, interaction at the boundary was not appealing for Uruzgan veterans. Apparently, in this study the need to be recognised and appreciated as veterans was not (yet) high enough among the Uruzgan veterans. I put the word yet in parentheses, since there did seem to be a latent need for attention and recognition among Uruzgan veterans, but it seemed as if the attachment to their military identification is prohibiting them from presenting themselves as veterans.

Concerning Srebrenica and Lebanon veterans, the stages on which they presented themselves may be the same overall, yet the motivations to do so differed. The Lebanon veterans in this study wanted to be seen, at least the ones who remain active as veterans. Their performance as veterans was aimed at improving awareness among the public on what veterans are and what their mission entailed. Comparable to Michalowski and Dubisch's study (2001) of Vietnam veterans, Lebanon veterans were willing to show themselves as veterans. Contrary to the Vietnam veterans in Michalowski and Dubisch's (2001) and Feinstein's (2015) studies, they did not present themselves as people who suffered through the war, were not seeking public support explicitly, and aimed merely for more neutral public interest. So, instead of portraying themselves as victims, they sought to present themselves as somewhere between the dutiful soldier and the happy civilian: a cheerful, sympathetic veteran. Lebanon veterans emphasised that they joined such presentations because they found it 'fun' or enjoyable, not because they believed it was necessary. The interaction with the audience seemed to remain on a rather superficial level, in which the audience was expected to just be interested in a neutral way, and not to ask critical questions. The stories Lebanon veterans told during lectures they believed should be informative and fun for listeners, and there was a major caution not to exaggerate. Vanity was judged by the Lebanon veterans, while honest communication was positively valued. However, being honest was not equal to telling an uncensored story. The world view of the audience was considered when speaking about deployment experiences: they should not be shocked by too much honesty or by gory details, the show should still be pleasant and relatively light.

Most Srebrenica veterans took it a step further and performed in order to restore their moral dignity. Like the Vietnam veterans in Michalowski and Dubisch' study (2001), they presented themselves as victims of state politics, but contrary to the Vietnam vet-

erans, they focused on their moral values instead of their suffering (see also Feinstein, 2015). They actively sought interaction with the audience, and shared their own remorse or ethical struggles (Molendijk, 2020, pp. 101-102) with the public. During the play *Dark Numbers* in 2018, the audience was taken out of their comfort zone by the description of morally challenging situations and in the end by turning on the lights and being asked to judge the performers. The audience was encouraged, almost forced, to share their moral judgments with the performing veterans, so these veterans were able to react and respond to those judgments. That Srebrenica veterans preferred to go in depth when interacting at the boundary was also shown in the television documentary 'Srebrenica – the powerless mission of Dutchbat' (Verbraak, 2020), where Dutchbat III veterans openly reflected on their experiences in Srebrenica and became emotional by recalling the powerlessness during the fall, as well as their blaming and shaming in the Netherlands afterwards. Srebrenica veterans wanted to tell the true story of what happened from their perspective, in order to restore their moral dignity. While for Lebanon veterans the main complaint was that nobody cared about their deployment, in the case of Srebrenica veterans, everybody seemed to care as their deployment had such a catastrophic ending. The Srebrenica veterans not only felt a lack of public interest in what that actual situation was like, they also felt severely judged and dismissed as worthy soldiers and citizens. This raised the stakes for their presentation: it became more relevant as it had to drastically impact the way others think about them, while for Lebanon veterans, the goal was primarily to be visible to the public.

Uruzgan veterans, on the other hand, described public perceptions as lacking overall interest and morally judgmental. However, they looked back on a relatively successful mission, in the sense that they felt they could do what they were trained for and they carried out their duty. Powerlessness played only a minor role in their stories of deployment; instead, they tended to feel empowered, which might have made it easier to deal with judgments of others.

In addition to the nature of the mission and the perceived public opinion, another explanation of differences in the nature and objective of the performance, lies in the time elapsed between the deployment and the present. In the differences between the three veteran groups, we see an evolutionary pattern that can be explained by combining Goffman's presentation of self (Burns, 1999; Goffman, 1956; Manning, 2007) with Barth's theory on the processes of collective identity (Barth, 1969; Jenkins, 2014b). The first phase in this procedure would be to clarify what constitutes the others and the in-group, so differences with the outsiders as well as internal similarities have to be marked and narrated — as the Uruzgan veterans were doing, as shown in previous chapters. The next phase is to perform the way the group identifies and to experience the reaction of the audience, followed by adjustments of the presentation of self, as Srebrenica veterans were quite busy with. Then, when the desired balance in the performance is reached,

as was the case among Lebanon veterans, the performance only needs to be modified when the reactions of others changes. In this case, continuation of the collective performance is most important and therefore, internal social control flourishes. This suggests an evolutionary pattern of performing identifications, heavily influenced by the context of interaction, as I will discuss further in the next and concluding chapter.





6

**Conclusion: The construction of a
veteran**

For this study, I spoke with 47 veterans, who all opened up to me about the course that their life has taken over the years, how they looked back on their military service and deployment, and who they are now. I listened to them making sense of the world, their position in it, and their connection to others: veterans such as Hans, Stefanie, Erik, and many more, with different personalities, interests, and lifestyles, navigating their way through life. All veterans in this study, however differently they reflected on their military deployment(s), functions, and experiences, shared one commonality: the exceptional experience of having been deployed and, as a result, having received the veteran status. They expressed varying responses to this status, such as the veteran who defined himself as a ‘professional veteran’, as he never missed an opportunity to be present at veteran gatherings or public manifestations where he could present himself as a veteran. Another did not have any desire to identify as a veteran, let alone to present himself as such, and wanted to cooperate with my research just to show me that not every veteran cares for this label. He assumed that someone like me, who worked at the Veterans Institute, only met ‘professional veterans’. Indeed, these veterans are the most visible in my regular workday, and they may have contributed the most to my own image of the veteran. This research made me aware of the two-dimensional image of the veteran I had created in my mind: a white male walking in an old uniform, using military expressions, and eager for the next opportunity to parade. Interacting with such a wide variety of veterans made me aware of how diverse this population actually is, and how common their struggles are — such as relationship difficulties, finding meaning in their work, and wondering what would have happened if they had taken another road in their lives. As I described in the Methods Section in Chapter One, during the interviews, I tried to speak as much as possible as a researcher, and not as a representative of the Netherlands Veterans Institute. I used the same approach while writing this book.

6.1 REASON FOR AND APPROACH TO STUDYING IDENTIFICATION AMONG VETERANS

I started this book with some citations of veterans discussing what being a veteran meant to them. In these citations, what stood out was the diversity of meanings assigned to the status of veteran and the ways these interpretations related with perceptions of veterans in society. Again and again, I observed a diverse sense of unity during veteran gatherings and events. While clearly bonded as a group, veterans were also individuals struggling over meaning by telling stories of the past. Also, they often reflected on not being understood or being forgotten by society. In the Netherlands, no large studies have focused on how veterans make meaning around their status, nor explored the perceived societal views on veterans. In other words, there was not much known about the

ways people identify as veterans, although this process of identification did implicitly play a large role in all that was facilitated for veterans: reunions, commemorations, Veterans Day, veterans health care, a veterans magazine, and a Veterans Institute. It caused me to wonder what it meant to be a veteran and what role the perception of others plays in their identification process.

Investigation and debate in the social sciences have demonstrated that identification is a social construct that requires interaction with others (Barth, 1969; Brubaker & Cooper, 2000; Jenkins, 2014c). Through interaction, group members negotiate who is in and who is out, thus defining the boundaries and characteristics of the group (Barth, 1969; Goffman, 1956; Jenkins, 2014c). Finding similarities within groups occurs simultaneously with defining differences from outsiders (Jenkins, 2014c; Van Meijl, 2010). This is an ongoing process and therefore the term identification, a verb which suggests dynamic action, prevails over the noun identity, which is a temporary state in this process. Although a group can be externally labelled by powerful actor (Jenkins, 2014a) as is the case for veterans, individuals of the group themselves do have the capacity to decide whether to identify as veterans and how to express this identification. What it means to belong to the veteran group, how one should behave, is defined through ongoing social interaction among veterans themselves. This process of making meaning can differ by individual and it may also change with the context and over time.

This led me to the central question of this dissertation: what are the similarities and differences in the way veterans identify as veterans, and what role do societal views on veterans, as experienced by these veterans themselves, play in this process? The study's objective was to examine the interrelation between how veterans identify and their perceptions of how society sees them. To gain insight into this matter, I compared three different veteran groups based on the missions they participated in. The missions took place in different periods, in diverse military contexts and with a varied public perception, namely Dutchbatt in Lebanon, Dutchbat in Srebrenica (Former Yugoslavia) and Task Force Uruzgan in Afghanistan. During the mission in Lebanon, the Cold War was the European reality, while during the mission in Uruzgan, fundamentalist terrorism was the main worldwide threat. Also, while during Lebanon, most deployed soldiers were conscripts, during the mission in Srebrenica most were professional soldiers, and during Uruzgan each deployed soldier was a professional soldier. Further, the missions themselves differed in goals, mandates, and international context. Yet, everyone deployed during these (and other) missions falls under the definition of 'veteran'. As for the second argument for choosing these missions, although the level of appreciation among the public for veterans of these missions was more or less equal, the recent societal debates about the missions differ. While the debate about the mission in Lebanon is characterised by silence, the debate about Srebrenica continues today and is characterised by attempts to answer the question of what caused the fall of the Safe Area. Meanwhile,

the debate on the Uruzgan mission is also very much alive and centred at the time of the interviews mainly around the question of whether the mission was useful. Comparing veterans from these three missions provides insight into how societal views influence veteran identification, while not overlooking other aspects that may play a role, such as the military and societal contexts in which the missions took place.

Central to my approach was the experience of the veterans themselves as narrated by them. Semi-structured interviews provided insight into how they identified as veterans, how they thought others view veterans, and how they presented themselves to these others. As part of the analysis, I abstracted meanings and values relating to the identification process, the opinions of others, and their self-presentation, while remaining close to their personal stories by citing the words and voices of veterans themselves to make my arguments. I also visited veteran gatherings and events. In these circumstances, I gained insight into how veterans shape their identification in a group setting, which was a welcome supplement to the individual interviews. Also, the gatherings illustrated the data of the interviews. For instance, during the commemoration in Loenen on May 4th, I observed what veterans were talking about when they mentioned 'Loenen', which clarified for me why this event was of importance when expressing their identification as veterans. Hence, I used an etic approach, as I abstracted concepts, such as the representations of a veteran, from the stories the veterans told me and my observations during gatherings and events.

6.2 PARALLELS AND VARIATIONS IN IDENTIFICATION PROCESSES AMONG DUTCH VETERANS WHO SERVED IN MILITARY MISSIONS IN LEBANON, SREBRENICA, AND URUZGAN

As previously discussed, who is a veteran is defined by law. But what it means to be a veteran is constructed by the veterans themselves, in interaction with society. This study demonstrated that veterans create and invoke images and perceptions of what a veteran is, in interaction with established societal images and perceptions of veterans. Identification as a veteran is therefore a process of imagination, interaction, and reflection. To what extent a veteran identifies as a veteran depends on the perceived match between the image constructed by the veteran and personal characteristics, experiences, and needs. This is not a static fact, but a dynamic process: identification as a veteran may fluctuate over time and depends on context.

While this has not been the focus of a study into Dutch veterans before, nor an extensive subject of research in other countries, there have been some publications on these topics, as described in Chapter One. Both Feinstein (2015) and Sørensen (2015),

studying veteran narratives in very different countries, the United States and Denmark respectively, showed how veterans respond to societal narratives on veterans in their own narrative, such as turning the image of a suffering victim into a resilient go-getter (Denmark) or using the image of national hero when it seemed useful in interaction with civilians (United States). Various studies have (implicitly) shown how self-images and public images of soldiers and their missions are constructed and intertwined during deployment, as well as shortly after the deployment (Molendijk 2018; Sion, 2006; Sørensen, 2015; Tomforde, 2005).

In this study, I demonstrated how the construction of and interaction between these images continues for decades after the mission. Namely, what it means to be a veteran is under continuous renovation and reflection among veterans themselves. Also, societal perceptions of missions, veterans, and military occupations are subject to change. This study showed how important the role of both context and time is in this process of identification as a veteran. I have examined this process in detail through the comparison between the three veteran groups. As I elaborate in this section, although the identification process itself in the three groups showed many similarities, the differences in military and societal context between the three veteran groups created different effects. Specifically, the most common veteran images differed between the three groups, as did what the veterans saw as the cause of societal ignorance towards them and the armed forces. Also, the three groups reacted differently to the lack of knowledge and moral judgments. Besides differences in identifying as veterans, there were also some striking similarities found in the narratives of veterans in this study. The three groups shared numerous similarities in the process of constructing an image of 'the veteran' and narrating their relationships to this image, and each group bristled at and resisted societal stereotypes of veterans. All three groups showed individual variations, of course, but for all groups the role of deployment mattered for identifying as veterans, as did being a loyal buddy, using a grammar of Orientalisation, and discussing societal ignorance and mental health issues in relation to their identification as veterans. Also, their narratives were characterised to a large degree by moral reflection. In the following sections, I outline the similarities and differences found when it comes to whether veterans identify as veterans, how they themselves understand veterans, how they think others view them, and what consequences this has for them identifying as veterans and their interactions at the boundary.

To be or not to be — the role of deployment in the narrative

In Chapter One, I stated that identifying as a veteran means a present identity based on one or more military deployment(s) that took place in the past. The analysis of the data showed that if the deployment influences the present life of the individual veteran in a substantial way, identifying as a veteran is more salient than when the deployment

is merely one of many formative experiences. Especially when the consequences of deployment stood in the way of finding other fulfilling present ways of identifying, such as with a current job or relationship, identifying as a veteran became relevant. This was *similar* in all groups.

Regarding the role of deployment in their personal narratives, the most outstanding *differences* were found between Lebanon and Srebrenica veterans, on the one hand, and Uruzgan veterans, on the other. Whereas Uruzgan veterans often described that the deployment reality met their previous expectations, Srebrenica and Lebanon veterans often described a disruption when they first arrived at the location, or as time unfolded during their deployment. They expected the deployment areas to be more peaceful than they turned out to be, and this discrepancy made the deployment more crucial in the narrative. Since the deployment was the formal prerequisite for their veteran status, it mattered for identifying as a veteran: those from Lebanon and Srebrenica conflicts tended to be more involved in identifying as veterans than those from Uruzgan. Hence, the actual experience of deployment influenced the role of deployment in the veteran's narrative and thus the identification as a veteran decades later.

An explanation of differing narratives can be found in the military context of the Uruzgan mission as distinguished from the other two missions. Uruzgan reflected a professionalised military without conscripts, and multiple deployments for the individual soldier were more common than at the time of the other two missions. As the military was more professionalised and had learned from mistakes in the past, Uruzgan veterans were better prepared than the Lebanon and Srebrenica soldiers. Most Uruzgan veterans stayed in service after returning, which, in contrast to conscripts deployed to Lebanon, meant they were incorporated in a structure that helped them manage differences between expectations and reality, and these differences did not feature in their narratives.

Previous studies on veterans have shown that disruptive events lead to the need to redefine an identity (Bergman, Burdett, & Greenberg, 2014; Demers, 2011; Kilshaw 2006; Feinstein, 2015; Finley, 2011; Lomsky-Feder, 1995). Expectations of the mission versus its reality can indeed cause these kinds of disruptions, especially if expectations are more towards the masculine warrior type and the actual activities carried out turn out to be solely peacekeeping, as previous studies showed (Broesder, 2011; Sion, 2006). Sion (2006) showed in her study of two Dutch units trained for peace keeping missions in the late 1990s, shortly after Srebrenica, that the training was very much directed at war circumstances instead of peace keeping, which caused identity issues for the soldiers during deployment, as their role during the mission turned out to be much more 'feminine', i.e., directed at talking to the local population instead of engaging in combat. However, most Lebanon and Srebrenica veterans in this study describe the gap between expectations and reality the other way around: they expected a calm environment but encountered a hostile one where there 'was not much peace to keep'. While the expecta-

tions of Uruzgan veterans, 'doing what they were trained to do' — in other words, to exercise the role of warrior — indeed matched the reality of the mission. Thus, they did not experience the same disruption as Lebanon and Srebrenica veterans, which makes the deployment less crucial in their identification processes and identifying as a veteran less relevant or prominent to their narratives. However, narratives can change (Adler & Leyesdorff, 2013), and the role of the deployment in one's narrative may change over time, as I will demonstrate in section 6.3.

How veterans narrate 'the veteran'

The first ethnographic chapter of this dissertation focused on images that each group of veterans hold of what a veteran is, and how veterans position themselves in relationship to this image. In this section, I explore the similarities and differences in the aspects of the narratives of veterans that concern how they see 'the veteran' (a typical character that most veterans imagine), and how they contrast this image with non-veterans. I start with what the three veteran groups have in common, and follow with a reflection on their differences. What they shared is the image of the veteran as a loyal buddy and the use of a grammar of Orientalisation when explaining how veterans differ from non-veterans. The groups differed in their images of 'the veteran', invoking alternately an injured person, a helper, and a dedicated soldier.

Similarities – Loyal buddy and grammar of Orientalisation as military legacy

The representation of the veteran as a loyal buddy occurred in all three groups, and relates to the cohesion felt in the military, which has endured or has been brought back to life. I view the loyal buddy as a symbolic inheritance from the camaraderie experienced in the military. Being there for each other, no matter what, is something veterans experienced in the military and continue to experience in contact with fellow veterans. This bond is created in military service and strengthened during deployment, in order to have the military unit function as a whole (Cooper et al., 2018; Hale, 2008; Molendijk, 2020). Instrumental in creating this bond is the sense of being different from civilians, which is created in discourse but also in military practices, such as hazing rituals when entering the service (Binks & Cambridge, 2018; Christensen et al., 2018; Cooper et al., 2018; Demers, 2011; Hale, 2008; Mouthaan, Euwema, & Weerts, 2005; Sion, 2006; Smith & True, 2014; Soeters, Winslow, & Weibull, 2006; Wilson, 2008).

This discourse on differences from civilians does not completely disappear after veterans have left the service, thereby possibly hindering complete reintegration. Some veterans continue to feel alienated from mainstream society for years after they have left the service. This study demonstrated how the veterans that experienced an estrangement between veterans and regular civilians use a grammar of Orientalisation (Baumann, 2004; Said, 1978). This grammar reflects and enacts feelings of commonality

and bonding among veterans and distinguishes them from civilians, especially when veterans feel misunderstood and judged by civilians. In table 6.1, table 1.2 (p. 27) about the grammar of Orientalisation in the military is combined with table 4.1 (p. 122) about the same grammar among veterans.

Table 6.1 Grammar of Orientalisation based on literature on the military and on the interviews with veterans

Military	Veterans on themselves	Veterans on civilians
Physical endurance and toughness		Laziness
Mental endurance and toughness	Decisiveness	Emotional / quick to give up
Action-oriented	Action-oriented	Preference for talking
Team-spirit	Socially minded	Individually minded
	Acting for the greater good	Acting out of self-interest
	Have seen the world	Ignorant about the world
Willing to take a high risk	Aware of the harshness of the world	Not having to run a high risk / Innocent and carefree

While the similarities are clear, some differences are noticeable as well. In the discourse of veterans, the physical endurance of soldiers is no longer mentioned, as the veterans themselves also admitted to 'have aged a little bit'. Furthermore, 'mental toughness' has been reconceptualised as 'decisiveness' because of the association between veterans and mental health issues. Also, veterans distinguished themselves from soldiers, saying that veterans act for the greater good. This shows that acting for the greater good might be added to the narrative later, after deployment. In other words, claiming that acting for the greater good motivated their decision to deploy, does not mean that it indeed was the motive, because it can be added retrospectively as a justification or rationalisation. This conclusion is further strengthened as the discourse of having sacrificed oneself for the greater good is more prominent in the narratives of Lebanon and Srebrenica veterans than in the narratives of Uruzgan veterans, whose deployment took place more recently. The aspect of veterans' worldliness compared to civilians is also related to deployment, which often changed the worldview of the veterans. The same is true for the last aspect in the grammar: the experience of deployment transformed a willingness to take high risk into an awareness of the harshness of the world. Hence, the differences in the grammar are related to both time and deployment. By using this grammar, veterans expressed and created their own imagined community (Anderson, 1983).

Not all veterans experienced differences in attitudes between veterans and civilians in an equally strong manner: the informants not identifying as veterans tend to experience these differences less dramatically or not at all. This demonstrated how these differences emerged from identifying as veterans, and simultaneously strengthened the identification as veterans. In their article on U.K military personnel, Cooper et al. (2016) described how veterans carry military cultural attitudes into civilian life 'without being

explicitly aware' (p. 164). Based on my study, I would argue that veterans are aware, perhaps due to time spent as a civilian in society in the meantime, as they articulated these differences and related them to their experiences at their workplace or in conversations with civilians. Instead of subconscious tendencies, these differences between 'us' and 'them' become a source of pride and form building blocks for identification. Identifying is, after all, about defining similarities and differences simultaneously. Stressing the differences between veterans and civilians is a form of boundary maintenance (Barth, 1969; Jenkins, 2014b). This also indicates that identifying as a veteran inevitably means feeling isolated from 'regular' civilians and therefore, from society.

Differences – Injured person, helper, dedicated soldier

In addition to the essential quality of the veteran as a loyal buddy, there are other ideas about 'the veteran' that can be abstracted from the interviews (see Chapter Three). Lebanon veterans mainly positioned themselves in relation to the image of the veteran as injured person, even though they also criticised this very representation. Srebrenica veterans combined the image of the injured person with the veteran as helper, while Uruzgan veterans associated being a veteran mainly with the image of a dedicated soldier. They also described 'the veteran' as an old man, whose military days are far behind him. This contrasted with the image of the veteran as a dedicated soldier, although all these images coexisted within this group. This explains the reluctance to present oneself as a veteran among Uruzgan veterans, as well as the back-and-forth movement on wanting or needing to be recognised as a veteran by the public. It also shows the complexity of identification as veteran.

The image of the dedicated soldier shows the military's obvious influence on a veteran's choice of identification. In Chapter Three, I discussed the similarities in terms of 'the extraordinary' (Lebanon), 'the experienced' (Srebrenica) and 'the dedicated soldier' (Uruzgan). All included an exceptional experience. 'The extraordinary' represented the veteran as a person who did something *exceptional*, while 'the experienced' represented the veteran as someone who has a *rare* life experience. 'The dedicated soldier' is a representation of the veteran as a person who performed military tasks as well as possible during the *extraordinary experience* of deployment. A differentiating factor was how long ago one's military deployment occurred. Uruzgan veterans, who felt the closest connection with military, identified as dedicated soldiers, while for Srebrenica veterans, the image of the veteran as an experienced person was characterised by more distance from the military. For Lebanon veterans, as the distance between their present and the military service was often greater, the military deployment had become a more exceptional chapter in their lives; therefore, they viewed the veteran as a person with extraordinary experiences. Also, Lebanon and Uruzgan veterans tended to feel more pride in their mission than Srebrenica veterans, which made the image of 'the experienced' more

neutral than the other two images. Lesser pride on their mission was also reflected in the percentages presented in Chapter Two and is probably caused by the horrific ending of the mission in Srebrenica. To summarise, both mission context as well as time played a role in the development of these images.

Role of perceived perceptions of others in the identification process

The second ethnographic chapter focused on how the veterans in this study felt others perceived them. In interviews, veterans reflected on other's opinions of the armed forces, the military occupation, the deployment, and veterans, based on their personal interactions with civilians and perceived media biases regarding these topics. In this section, I compare similarities and differences in how the three groups perceive and react to societal views. I begin by describing the cohesion that veterans groups developed in response to societal ignorance of their mission and experience. Then I discuss the distinctions between veterans groups in response to this societal ignorance — namely, what they view as its cause and how it effects their presentation of self. Subsequently, I move on to the similarity of experienced stereotypes and the differences that exist in reacting to perceived moral judgments.

Similarities — Ignorance stimulating group cohesion and vice versa

Virtually all veterans interviewed thought regular civilians will never understand what deployment is like. The perception of this lack of understanding led to selective interaction, which meant that veterans chose settings in which they wished to interact (see also Driessen, 2021; Feinstein, 2015). Generally, veterans kept silent about deployment experiences and/or chose to share these experiences only with fellow veterans in general, or in particular with former buddies they were deployed with. Other studies of veterans have previously demonstrated how feeling misunderstood or even judged stimulates veterans to unite (Braithwaite, 1997; Elands, 2000; Gade & Wilkins, 2013; Michalowski & Dubisch, 2001; Moelker & Schut, 2010; Mouthaan, Euwema, & Weerts, 2005). This mutual bonding strengthened the image of the veteran as a loyal buddy. Furthermore, I argued how group cohesion can foster perceptions of misunderstanding when veterans tell each other that civilians do not understand them. Then, it may evolve into feeling united against a common 'enemy', as some other studies have shown (Braithwaite, 1997; Feinstein, 2015). Veterans then interpret the painful misunderstanding and judgments of civilians as a confirmation of veterans' exceptionality. As Brewer stated in her article on the social self,

What is painful at the individual level becomes a source of pride at the group level (1991, p. 481).

So, not feeling understood by others underlines the feeling of being different from civilians and this fosters group cohesion among veterans. This strengthens feelings of separation from society, which is expressed through a grammar of Orientalisation, of 'us' versus 'them', as described in the previously.

Binks & Cambridge (2018) suggested that it is either the attitudes in the armed forces towards society or the attitudes in society towards the armed forces that stimulate perceptions of separation towards society among ex-service personnel. I argue that these two aspects reinforce each other. Just as veterans' perceptions of being different from civilians enhances the likelihood of being misunderstood by civilians, the actual experience of being misunderstood by civilians increases veterans' feelings of separation from society. There is a two-way street between experiences of misunderstanding and group cohesion. Feeling misunderstood by others plays an important role in the connectedness with fellow veterans. Mutual understanding is what unites veterans, which would not be such a strong bonding mechanism if outsiders understood veterans. And it is exactly this specific bonding that in turn becomes inexplicable to regular civilians. This mysterious mutual bond is what unites veterans and separates them from other civilians. Yet, it is this separation from civilians that is needed in some shape to make sense of identification as a veteran.

In that sense, the reactions of others, the perceived attitudes in society, and views of media bias can all be interpreted as part of the narrative constructed to illustrate identification. The experiences of misunderstanding, combined with the lack of appreciation and societal support are incorporated into the narratives about what it means to be a veteran. These common frustrations become instrumental in making sense of the social world, in how veterans identify and present themselves, and in how they relate to other veterans. These experiences become narrative building blocks.

Differences — The causes of ignorance and its effect on the presentation of self

The veteran groups differed from each other in what they see as the causes of societal ignorance. Most Lebanon veterans perceived ignorance as what it is: a lack of knowledge in society. While most Uruzgan veterans thought that a lack of interest caused this lack of knowledge. And because Srebrenica veterans had been the subject of debate after the Safe Area fell, they did not complain about a lack of interest. Instead, they identified public judgements based on inaccurate or incomplete media coverage, while the public was largely unaware of the realities on the ground for soldiers.

Responding to these public perceptions shaped the ways veterans chose to present themselves. Uruzgan veterans felt as if the public did not care at all about veterans, which contributed to their reluctance to present themselves as veterans. For veterans of the two other missions, whether they felt the public was aware of their mission was of importance for the effect they aimed to achieve when presenting themselves.

First, Lebanon veterans received little public attention and interest. One could say their deployment, at least in their eyes, had been 'forgotten' by the public, as they felt their mission is not well known by the Dutch public. For some of the Lebanon veterans I interviewed, this was fine, they have 'moved on'. Others, however, aimed to remind Dutch society of their existence, of the mission they completed. Their presentation of self was often directed at spreading knowledge about their deployment, by giving guest lectures or being present during national commemorations or on Veterans Day. Among the Lebanon veterans in this study, their presentation towards outsiders was a response to society's forgetfulness as well as a moral appeal to the collective to recognise veterans in general and the mission to Lebanon, in particular.

On the other side of the spectrum, we find the deployment to Srebrenica. Srebrenica veterans felt the public attention to their mission was unavoidable, if only because this attention returned every year around July. This remembering has a societal function (Misztal, 2010): it prohibits the nation from making the same mistake of engaging in a mission impossible while not being supported by the troops of allies. However, Srebrenica veterans did not feel that they are portrayed fairly or even correctly by the media. Lately, Srebrenica veterans have been actively trying to influence the story that is remembered by society. They have been contributing to historiography by telling their version of events, and by this, they have been influencing their public image. For Srebrenica veterans, in comparison to Lebanon veterans in this study, it was not of importance to just be remembered by society — because they already were — but to influence *how* they are remembered, namely, as soldiers who meant well and are still suffering from their experiences, instead of being stereotyped as cowards standing on the wrong side of history, as they believed the media narrative has depicted them.

Hence, ignorance among the public may show itself to veterans by forgetting of the past, as well as remembering the past in an inaccurate or unsympathetic way. And although the experience of public ignorance about the armed forces and veterans was the same for all groups, the different views of what caused this ignorance influenced their self-presentations. Therefore, the presentation of self did not completely reflect the most common images of the veteran. As Goffman described, what is demonstrated on stage differs from how people view themselves backstage (Goffman, 1956; Manning, 2007). The presentation of veterans was directed at bridging the gap between how they viewed themselves and how they thought the public viewed them. Instead of only showing the veteran as an injured person, which lied close to the societal stereotype of the veteran as a victim, Lebanon veterans focused on their extraordinary experience, another variation of the image of 'the veteran'. Srebrenica veterans tried to fill the gap between self-image and societal perceptions by showing their moral conscience through sharing their doubts and ethical struggles when looking back on deployment.

Lastly, Uruzgan veterans did not (yet) feel the need to present themselves in order to make the public change their minds about them as veterans.

Similarities — Stereotypes

In all three groups, veterans perceived civilians judging them and their mission out of ignorance. This judgement went deeper than ignorance or misunderstanding, and indicated that Dutch citizens view working in the military as an 'infamous occupation' (Blok, 2001) or a 'dirty job' (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999, 2014a, 2014b). Whether it is an underestimation of the deployment, a reproach of soldiers' imagined actions, or assuming the veteran must be mentally suffering, the perception of being judged or stereotyped intensified the inclination to turn inwards.

The most common stereotypes were the veteran as perpetrator of violence and the veteran as a person suffering from PTSD, both of which veterans wished not to be associated with. All three groups of veterans agreed that these stereotypes emerge from ignorance, as outsiders lack knowledge of their mission. An explanation for the prevalence of the 'PTSD-stereotype' can be that the image of the injured veteran bridges the gap in morality between the civilian and the veteran, at least from a civilian perspective. Participating in a war as a soldier, from a civilian perspective, means using violence and going through hardships. A civilian is not allowed to use violence, and they sincerely hope to avoid hardships, while, as a matter of speaking, soldiers are 'choosing' to do so and therefore choose to run the risk of experiencing potentially traumatising events (Klep, 2019b, p.105).²⁹ Both aspects create a moral distance between civilians and veterans (see also Sørensen, 2015). Then, a suffering veteran demonstrates to the public a moral conscience and an understanding of their environment similar to a regular civilian's. At the same time, many veterans did not appreciate this public image of suffering since they did not wish to be seen as victims or associated with PTSD. It appeared from the stories of my informants that the fact that serving in a war *can be* mentally traumatising, changed somewhere along the line into the public conviction that serving in a war *must be* traumatising. Indeed, although survey research among the Dutch population has shown that civilians particularly associate veterans with characteristics such as helpful, dutiful, and brave, about six out of ten adults in the public also think of a veteran as someone having mental health issues (Blauw Research, 2013; Bot & Ait Moha, 2018; Duel, 2019; TOS, 2014, 2015), while only a minority suffers from these issues (Reijnen & Duel, 2019).

29 Even the missions they participated in have been defined as 'wars of choice', as neither was a reaction to a direct attack on the Netherlands sovereignty (Klep, 2019d, p.205).

Differences — Reacting to stereotyping

In their narratives, veterans responded to the perception of others' lack of knowledge and moral judgments. The groups did so in different ways, which can be explained by both mission context and societal debate on the mission. For instance, as a reaction to the lack of knowledge in society, Lebanon and Srebrenica veterans described how they provided 'a critical service' (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014b, pp. 89-90), as they temporarily relieved the local population or at least prevented a bad situation from getting worse. That they or their buddies sacrificed their mental health while doing so, fits well with the image of the veteran as 'the injured'. Uruzgan veterans reacted with a discourse of providing a critical service as well, but on the receiving end were Dutch citizens instead of Afghan citizens. Here we see the difference between a peace keeping and a peace enhancing mission: the blue helmets saw themselves as mainly serving for the peace of the local people, while the green helmets were in Afghanistan to fight an enemy as dedicated soldiers.

As a reaction to moral judgments on (not) having used violence, Srebrenica and Uruzgan veterans used what has been called a discourse of neutralising (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999, p. 422), in which they emphasised that they acted under orders. The discourse of Srebrenica veterans thus consisted of providing a critical service combined with neutralising. This fits well with the image of the veteran as helper: the person with the best intentions but who was, in this case, restricted by rules and regulations.

In their narratives, Uruzgan veterans combined providing a critical service and a discourse of neutralising with refocusing on their tasks (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999, p. 423), shifting the emphasis from the question whether their mission was useful in the broader sense to their own efficacy as military professional. This fits well with the image of the veteran as a dedicated soldier: the one who carries out the necessary military tasks as well as possible, and as ordered. It is possible that, in time, the image of the veteran as injured person or as a helper will become more common among Uruzgan veterans. Over time, when the deployment lies further in the past and most veterans have 'moved on' with their lives, the image of the veteran as an injured person will become more dominant, since veterans with mental health issues are more likely to identify as a veteran. Further, developments that took place after the interviews were conducted, namely Uruzgan veterans opening up in the media about their moral struggles as a result of their deployment (Broere, 2020; Van der Ziel, 2020), the charge against the state because of civil deaths during the Battle for Chora, and the Taliban taking over Afghanistan, have put the mission to Uruzgan in the public eye again. Over time, this kind of public attention may lead to a resurgence of the image of the veteran as wanting to do good, i.e., to being a helper.³⁰

30 This is already visible in the narratives of the two Uruzgan veterans who tell their story in the documentary 'the

To summarise, the three groups experienced ignorance in society resulting in stereotypes which concern the association between veterans and PTSD and a moral stigma related to the use of violence. However, they offered various perspectives on the root causes of ignorance in society regarding the armed forces and veterans, perspectives which manifested as differences in the presentation of self. Also, the groups differed in how they reacted to this lack of knowledge, resulting in different meaning making around the mission. This meaning making in turn related to the image of ‘the veteran’ they painted in their narratives. In section 6.4, I elaborate on what can explain these variations. First, I turn to two themes that transcend the boundaries of the veteran groups and appear to be omnipresent when talking with and about veterans.

6.3 WHAT WE TALK ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT VETERANS

Two themes came especially to the fore during the analysis of the interviews, namely, the association between veterans and mental health issues and moral reflection. These themes seemed to be unavoidable when talking about the deployment, reflecting on what it means to be a veteran and societal views on both the deployment and veterans.

The role of mental health issues

Whether veterans in this study experienced mental health issues themselves or not, taking mental health issues into account while talking about what it means to be a veteran appeared to be unavoidable. It was never my intention to include this topic in my study. On the contrary, I was planning research on veterans that had nothing to do with mental health issues, as the majority of veterans do not suffer from these (Reijnen & Duel, 2019; Van Wijngaarden & Meije, 2015). Still, while not a single question in my topic list was about mental health issues, none of the 47 interviews have been conducted without the interviewee bringing it up themselves. Whether it was because they had or have had psychological problems themselves, or because they knew other veterans with psychological problems, or whether they were so tired of the experienced prejudice of problematic mental health among all veterans, the topic of mental health seemed inescapable.

Betrayal of Chora’ (Can, 2021). They used a similar narrative to Srebrenica veterans when constructing the image of the veteran as helper, for instance when they described their motivations for deployment. They both struggled with their mental health. Two journalists who appeared in this documentary, who were writing a book about the Battle of Chora, used the same narrative as they described the deployed soldiers as ‘wanting to help the people of Afghanistan’. This narrative is also visible when veterans reacted in the media to the return of the Taliban regime (see, e.g. ANP, 2021; Feenstra, 2021; RTLNieuws, 2021).

Whether they were agitating against the focus on psychological suffering or not, often, when referring to other veterans and what it means to be a veteran, mental health issues did play a decisive role, at least among Lebanon and Srebrenica veterans. For veterans who suffered from psychological problems themselves, realising they were veterans functioned in their story as their first step to recovery, as it simultaneously had helped them to realise what was wrong with them and why — and therefore, how and where to get help. Veterans with mental health issues often tended to view deployment as *the* turning point in their life, which in turn encouraged their identification as veterans, since the military deployment is *the* prerequisite for the veteran status. On the other hand, veterans without mental health problems tended to see the deployment as one of the formative experiences in their lives, which makes identifying as veterans less significant. Also, this study does indicate that for veterans who identify with other current roles, such as their occupation or position in their family, identifying as veterans is of less importance. Veterans experiencing health problems are more likely to lack a satisfactory identification with work or family, which makes identifying as veterans more significant.

Further, identifying as a veteran is less appealing for veterans not suffering from any mental health issues, because of the societal stereotype of the veteran as a victim having mental health issues (particularly PTSD). They do not recognise themselves in this public image. At the same time, this stereotype makes it more obvious for the veterans who do suffer from mental health issues to identify as veterans. This strengthens the public perception of the veteran as a suffering human being, as the ones with mental health issues become overrepresented in the veterans that interact at the boundary, in other words, are visible to the public. To summarise, identification as a veteran and mental health issues relating to the deployment are deeply intertwined.

Moral reflection

Talking about identifying as a veteran means memorialising the past, as the military deployment, which lies in the past, is the prerequisite for identification as a veteran in the present. Whether one identifies as a veteran and when this is of significance, is narrated by veterans themselves. Although the past does not change, memories and life stories can change over time, as can context and type of audience (Adler & Leydesdorff, 2013; Hammack, 2008; McAdams & McLean, 2013; McLean, Pasupathi & Pals, 2007; McLean & Syed, 2015). What stood out in the narratives of veterans was a moral reflection on their past.

All three groups discussed what went well and what went wrong in the past. In this study, veterans reflected on their deployment, personal functioning, present personality, other veterans, other citizens, media, and politics by continuously making the distinction between 'good' and 'bad'. This moral reflection is critical in their narratives

and therefore, to the process of identifying and interaction. Earlier studies already showed how veterans morally reflect on their mission and the meaning of their mission (Molendijk, 2020; Rietveld, 2009; Schok, 2009; Schok et al, 2008). What this study clarified is that morality is a central theme in the veterans' narratives, even when the researcher did not seek out feelings of guilt, shame, or ethical struggles. In this sense, veterans do not appear very different from 'regular' human beings.

When constructing social reality through interacting and reflecting, all human beings use some form of morality as navigation (Adler & Leydesdorff, 2013; Durkheim, 2012 [1961]; Sayer, 1999, p 414). However, this moral compass is of extra relevance for veterans, since in this case veterans are reflecting on others' judgement of them as 'immoral'. For veterans, the moral judgments they experienced did not do justice to their perspectives on themselves, their former occupation, or their deployment. Honneth (2005, p. 47) described how the experience of this kind of injustice can damage the relationship one has with their self and with society, causing a 'moral injury' (see Molendijk, 2020, p. 167). However, instead of focusing on how this moral injustice has damaged veterans, I focused on how veterans have responded to the moral judgments. Instead of seeing them as victims of circumstances, I have approached veterans as actors, constructing their own images through interaction with other veterans as well as with society. Veterans in this study coped with moral judgments from others through constructing a morally dignified narrative, in which they argued why they did what they did and why this was the right thing to do.

This is especially visible in the image of Srebrenica veterans of the veteran as a helper. This image is comparable to the image Tomforde (2005) distinguished among German peacekeeping soldiers of the 'helper in uniform'. I found that this helping can become so internalised that the helper continues to exist after the uniform has been exchanged for civilian clothing. Many Srebrenica veterans who identified as helpers continued to do good now through volunteer work. They did not particularly view this helping as 'a civilian job'— i.e., not suiting the military occupation, which is directed at action and combat, as Sion (2006, p. 471) described in her study of Dutch peacekeeping soldiers. Instead, they viewed helping others as something typical for veterans, carrying with them that military mentality of solidarity and acting in the collective interest. This helping was most articulated among Srebrenica veterans, as it served as a response to perceived judgments in society on what they did not do right during their mission. However, emphasising one did good during their mission was also visible in the narratives of Uruzgan veterans, who underscored that they performed their military tasks well. Lebanon veterans similarly highlighted how they helped the local population.

The third and final ethnographic chapter concerned the ways veterans present themselves to wider society. The aspect of moral reflection was visible in the performance of both Lebanon and Srebrenica veterans. These veterans mentioned WW2 commemora-

tions as the most obvious moments of expressing themselves as veterans. Veterans Day was certainly of importance as well, but veterans often described May 4th commemorations or the parade on May 5th with more emotions. During these events, the veterans take their place in a national tradition, which above all, remembers what is good and what is wrong. In other words, it appeals to the moral conscience of contemporary society. Every year the public is reminded through speeches of the horrific events of the past and how we should all be aware of this in the hope of avoiding similar mistakes. Also, Dutch citizens should be thankful for their freedom, celebrate the heroes who have sacrificed for their country, and continue to be aware that everyone in the nation should be able to live in freedom (see also Slegtenhorst, 2019). On these occasions, veterans are visible as heroes: they symbolise 'the good', as freedom was 'powered by veterans'.³¹ So, WW2 commemoration events, as they distinguish good from bad, form a stage on which veterans can articulate their own position on the right side of history.

6.4 WHAT MATTERS IN IDENTIFICATION PROCESSES AMONG VETERANS

In this section, I outline the important building blocks in the construction of a veteran. As described above, the role of deployment in the narrative relates to identifying as a veteran. When the deployment is narrated as a turning point in life, identification as a veteran increases in significance. Also, when veterans know other identifications of salience, for instance with their work or relationships, identification as a veteran is of less relevance than when veterans do not identify with their current job or do not see themselves embedded in a family structure. These aspects are individually bound and transcend the group level.

Further, the groups have in common that articulating similarities and differences between veterans and non-veterans increases in importance when veterans feel judged by non-veterans. Feeling misunderstood in some way by society is essential in identifying as a veteran, as mutual understanding separates 'us' from 'them'. Hence, it might not be possible to make a veteran feel completely understood by anyone other than another veteran, if only since understanding from a non-veteran would erode the meaning of being a veteran. Some level of otherness is needed to give the veteran status meaning (see also MacLeish, 2021). In this study, veterans did not feel they have a big audience for their stories in the Netherlands. They blamed this on 'Dutch culture' and compared this with the United States, where appreciation is much more openly expressed. I would

31 Slogan of the campaign around 'speed dating with veterans', a programme which stimulates visitors of Liberation festivals on May 5th to talk to veterans about their experiences.

say that it is mainly the national self-image relating to war that makes a difference in how veterans feel seen and valued. As stated in Chapter One and Four, although the self-image of the Netherlands as a non-participant in military campaigns is more of a myth than a reality, this self-image can create discomfort and estrangement in society when honouring veterans.

However, feeling misunderstood or undervalued, although important in constructing a sense of self as a veteran, does not ultimately lead to viewing oneself as a veteran. The meaning attached to the label of veteran, and whether a veteran recognises oneself in this typical image of 'the veteran', matters most in the process of identifying as a veteran. Concerning this meaning of the label, three groups displayed different dominant perceptions on what a veteran is. In the development of these images, several aspects seem to play a role, namely: military context in which the deployment took place, perceived societal views, and time elapsed since the deployment.

The image of the veteran as 'dedicated soldier', popular among Uruzgan veterans, can be related to the military context of their mission, specifically the mandate which gave them a larger opportunity to exercise the role of warrior instead of peacekeeper. Also, the portrayal of a dedicated soldier is a reaction to the societal debate on the effects of the mission. Instead of trying to provide an answer to the question whether the mission was useful, Uruzgan veterans focus on their military achievements and the performance of tasks. The veteran as altruistic helper is unique to Srebrenica veterans, and is a response to the severely felt moral judgments in society. It also applies to their mission context as their weaponry was so light and the mandate so strict that they were not able to do anything other than reaching a helping hand. The veteran as an injured person is common among Lebanon and Srebrenica veterans and relates to sacrifices made when providing a service, sacrifices which became clear over time. Time is of influence on this particular image, as it took veterans time to realise they themselves or their buddies suffered from traumas, and to realise these traumas originated in deployment experiences.

Time plays an important role identification processes among veterans. Another element that demonstrates the importance of time, is the description of Uruzgan veterans about what being a veteran means to them, which often resembled the descriptions of Srebrenica and Lebanon veterans of their earlier selves, before they cared about being veterans. For some of the most active Lebanon and Srebrenica veterans, it took decades to feel affinity with their veteran status and to become active as veterans. Reasons why veterans became active as veterans after all these years were personal circumstances such as deployment related traumas, but also having more spare time because of retirement. The same process is described among veterans from earlier missions, for instance among Dutch East Indies veterans (De Reuver, 2021; Elands, 2000; Van Doorn, 2002).

Time influences perceptions in society about the military mission the veteran took part in. For instance, during the mission in Lebanon, there was scepticism around the usefulness of the mission, just as there was and still is around the mission to Uruzgan. However, nowadays, this debate about the usefulness of participating in UNIFIL has stopped, due to time that has passed as well as that the mission knew a relatively low number of victims, and barely any incidents that were highly controversial. As a consequence, Lebanon veterans sometimes feel as if they are 'forgotten' by the general public. How the presentation of self of Uruzgan veterans who identify as veterans will look in ten or twenty years probably depends on how (much) they believe society remembers their deployment. As we saw, this sense of the public's perception explains most differences between Lebanon and Srebrenica veterans. Being 'forgotten' caused Lebanon veterans to desire to be visible, while the way the Srebrenica mission was remembered led Srebrenica veterans to the desire to be remembered in a more sympathetic way.

In sum, perceived societal views do play a role in identifications as a veteran. What especially plays a role in expressing this identification is the experience of being forgotten or remembered, as well as the severeness of moral ambiguity around the military mission. These aspects in turn are influenced by time and mission context. The effect of perceived societal views on identification as a veteran is further mediated by the prevailing images of 'the veteran'. These images are constructed under influence of societal debate, mission context and time elapsed between the deployment and the present. The way veterans relate to this image personally, depends on personal context, which can of course change over time.





7

What It Means To be a Veteran: Some Reflections

In the Netherlands, 'veteran' has been an formalised label since 1990. Since then, policy implementers have taken initiatives to reach the two objectives formulated in the first policy document: to minimise negative effects of deployment on the health of veterans, and to express and stimulate recognition and appreciation for veterans (Kamerstuk 21490, 1990). During these years, and even before, veterans have been making sense of what it means to be a veteran, whether they identify as veterans and why, and how they wished to be viewed by others. This study has explored and analysed various ways that external and internal views on 'the veteran' influence each other, and which contextual factors shape this process. In this chapter, I elaborate on what the findings imply for veterans, society, and policymakers, as well as what further steps could be taken in studying this process. I do so by elaborating on the findings in relation to the following themes: mental health issues and the meaning of recognition and appreciation. These are derived from the two objectives of veteran policy. Then, I briefly discuss the in-between position veterans embody and whether this serves them in the long run. The chapter and this thesis end with a concluding statement on identification as a veteran and its interrelation with societal views on veterans and their missions.

7.1 THE EFFECT OF HEALTH AND WELL-BEING CONCERNS ON WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A VETERAN

This study has demonstrated how mental health issues play a decisive role in identification processes among veterans. On the policy level, mental health issues are the *raison d'être* of veterans policy. This policy has been developed in the Netherlands during the period when PTSD among Vietnam veterans was clinically defined and recognised as a prevalent diagnosis in the United States. This was the same era in which, in the Netherlands, several groups of war victims were demanding recognition for their suffering (Van Doorn, 2002; Withuis, 2002). One pillar of this veteran policy focuses explicitly on providing care and help for veterans in need, while the other pillar, recognition and appreciation, exists for two reasons: recognition for veterans' suffering, and the conviction that feeling recognised and appreciated would alleviate mental health suffering among veterans (Elands, 2000; Molendijk, 2020; Van Doorn, 2002). Indeed, in a broader perspective, Honneth (1995) argues that social recognition empowers individuals, thereby improving their wellbeing (see also Anderson & Honneth, 2005). Therefore, one objective of veteran policy — providing recognition and appreciation for veterans, and stimulating these in society — is strongly connected to the other objective, namely, minimising negative effects of deployment on veterans' health.³² While the phrase 'two

32 Hoofdlijnen van het veteranenbeleid, 1990

objectives' suggests two separate elements, both aspects are actually interrelated, and both resulted from concerns for the health and wellbeing of Dutch veterans.

As a result, the suffering veteran is a stereotype veterans are confronted with — to their frustration. Nevertheless, it has influenced their own image of 'the veteran'. The image of the injured veteran makes it more appealing to identify as a veteran for the ones with mental health problems, and identifying as a veteran can also help them to move forward on their path of healing. Meanwhile, it causes veterans without mental health problems to not identify (to a large degree) as veterans. This in turn strengthens the stereotype of veterans having psychological problems in society (see also Klep 2019b, p. 166), in such a way one could wonder whether this is indeed a stereotype resulting from ignorance. To clarify, if one considers that only a minority of veterans report deployment related mental health problems (Mouthaan et al., 2005; Olff et al., 2020; PRISMO, 2018; Reijnen & Duel, 2019; Van Wijngaarden & Meije, 2015; Wester & Snel, 2019), then it should indeed be a misconception to equal 'veteran' with 'mentally ill'. However, given that identification as a veteran is more appealing to veterans suffering from mental illness, they might become overrepresented in veterans who publicly present themselves as such. And even when their mental health issues are not central in their presentation, these issues catch on with the public as mental health issues bridge the moral gap between soldier and citizen. The resulting public image of veterans as suffering from their experiences in turn makes it less appealing for veterans without mental health issues to identify and present themselves as veterans, resulting in increased visibility of injured veterans, which turns this process into a vicious cycle. This is a cycle of which not only policymakers, but also the media and researchers should be aware, as these actors influence public stereotypes of veterans that veterans might internalise, which makes their reintegration into society more challenging and fraught, as indeed a recent quantitative study on US veterans showed (Markowitz et al., 2020). Or, as Macleish (2021, p. 13) succinctly put it in his article on the politics of veteran care, it becomes 'difficult to separate [PTSD, depression, anxiety and substance use] (...) from veteran status itself'.

In the field of research, many studies on Dutch veterans have focused on mental health issues (See for example Dirkzwager & Bramsen, 2008; Eekhout et al., 2016; Klaasens et al., 2008; Molendijk, 2018; Rietveld, 2009). While it is recommendable to be aware of any negative effects of serving the nation, researchers should be very aware that veterans with mental health issues are just a small part of the veteran population, as Duel & Reijnen (2020) also emphasised, based on their survey of veterans' wellbeing. They argued that the focus solely on negative effects of deployment should be broadened to study the longer-term effects of deployment experiences, thereby taking into account issues such as personal growth. I would like to add that veterans should feel they have space for moral reflection without having it pathologized. I do not doubt that mental health suffering may have its roots in memories that are painful at the moral level, but

not all moral reflecting leads to a 'moral injury', even when it leads to adjusting one's self-image or one's identification shifts. Moral reflecting on life events and one's own actions is human. And as we have seen, a moral stigma may be cast over the military occupation, as a soldier is trained to cross moral boundaries that a civilian cannot cross without becoming a criminal or an outcast. Veterans may face moral prejudices and judgments and they may struggle with these themselves as they reintegrate into civilian life. Logically, moral reflection is omnipresent in stories of veterans who have left the armed forces. It is important that qualified care exists for veterans whose struggle becomes overwhelming, just as it is important to emphasise that moral reflection is human and does not imply one is experiencing severe problems. For most veterans, their moral reflection works to their advantage when constructing a narrative in support of their identification.

Further, mental health struggles are not exclusive to veterans. The struggle veterans face is above all human. As Van Doorn (2002) wrote, pathologizing veterans can be dangerous. It causes veterans to be viewed separately from society and treated privately, remaining invisible to the rest of society. In other words, treating veterans as an 'ill' population may not help them to integrate in society; instead, it underscores they are separate from society, as also Duel, Truusa, and Elands (2019) argued. Meanwhile, recall that the primary request of veterans when campaigning for changes in veteran policy was merely to be seen and recognised by society as a valuable part of it. The fact that my respondents highly value their role in WW2 commemorations and celebrations proves how important veterans find it to be part of society's rituals, in a visible way.

As for veteran policy making, if the aim of policy initiatives is to have every veteran feel recognised and appreciated, one should be cautious to feed a stereotype excluding about four out of five Dutch veterans, who say they do not experience any burdens in their daily lives resulting from their deployment (Reijnen & Duel, 2019). However, when aiming to serve those for whom the label of veteran is of *most significance*, the needs and desires of veterans who do experience these burdens as a result of deployment should not be overlooked just because they form a minority.

7.2 WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE RECOGNISED AND APPRECIATED?

While recognition and appreciation certainly come up when talking to veterans about their identification, the answer to the question in the title of this section is not easily formulated. Recognition for a certain group implies they possess a certain quality that people outside this group do not have. For veterans, formally speaking, this quality is they have served the Kingdom of the Netherlands under conditions of war or in so-

called peace keeping or peace enhancing missions. This implies that having put yourself out there in order to fight or to secure peace is a quality deserving lifelong recognition. This may seem obvious when good soldiers are fighting bad oppressors on national soil, as was the case during the WW2 in the Netherlands. But what does this recognition mean when the war is far away, in either space or time or both, and loses its relevance to contemporary society?

Recognition is in the first place about visibility. A group cannot be recognised if the group is not known to society. Many veterans in this study remarked that there is not much actual knowledge in Dutch society about their deployment. Investments in mission specific knowledge by veteran policy implementers could improve that. First of all, informing the public during the mission is of importance. It increases the chance that veterans feel understood and supported by the home nation. While there may be limits to this, as too much media attention could endanger the military mission, sufficiently informing the home nation could be a goal for future missions. Second, concerning the stories of veterans, special attention could be paid to the motives of veterans for entering the military and going on deployment, as well as recognition of who they are now, and how they contribute to society through their (volunteer) work. Also, societal views on veterans impact their internal identification. Hence, cultivating sympathetic public images of veterans, as veteran policymakers are already aiming to do through veterans' awareness campaigns, affects how veterans view themselves. This also implies a responsibility of policymakers in choosing what images are disseminated and what representations are nuanced in the public debate. Changing people's interactions with veterans is a time-consuming process which may not always be effective, as these people function within social structures. Stereotypes and judgments may not totally fade, and there are boundaries to what can be socially manufactured. However, creating awareness of the veteran's story in society is valuable for their public image and it may increase perceptions of being recognised and valued.

Veterans themselves also play a role in creating both more knowledge about their mission as well as more public awareness of their experiences by publicly sharing their stories. Veterans could raise more awareness if they would open up more in daily conversations, although this means being vulnerable to undesired reactions. If veterans want their mission to be more widely known and understood, they should also be willing to endure public opinions about the mission, even if they disagree with those opinions, or believe they are misinformed. As recognition is about being seen, a viewer often constructs an opinion of what is visible. This opinion is subjective and can have other outcomes than the desired appreciation: people can judge the veteran to have been acting immorally, or pity the veteran as they see him suffering from his actions. In fact, it is exactly this tension between more awareness about missions and therefore more opinions on the mission that is leading to the question how desirable it truly is to

have every mission well remembered. Remembering a mission means creating room for debating a mission, and for members of society to develop opinions on it. The Ministry of Defence aims to promote the view that soldiers on missions 'do good abroad' (Klep, 2019d, p. 211), and recruitment campaigns advertise the soldier as an adventurous go-getter, and above all a humanitarian soldier (Klep, 2019d, p. 259). However, media attention and court cases concerning, for instance, the fall of Srebrenica and the battle of Chora, cast doubt on whether Dutch soldiers indeed did good on the humanitarian level. And when society is not sure the veterans were indeed the good soldiers fighting the bad, what does it mean for recognition and appreciation regarding its veterans?

The issue at stake here is that recognition does not always lead to the desired appreciation. However, visibility is needed to receive a form of appreciation that feels genuine. When somebody appreciates you who clearly does not know who you are or what you did, this can make appreciation feel shallow, as indeed Molendijk (2020) described in her thesis on Dutch Srebrenica and Afghanistan veterans. Through investing in visibility, appreciation can be encouraged, but not forced. Appreciation remains subjective to the giver and receiver, who both can have very different experiences during the same interaction, especially considering the receiver perceives a gap in experience and mindset between themselves and the giver to start with. Civilians' questions that may be meant to show genuine interest ('Have you killed anyone? Are you suffering from it now?') are perceived by the veterans as moral judgments or signs of ignorance. Indeed, this could be an explanation for the gap between societal appreciation felt by the veterans (at best 3 out of 10) (Cozzi et al., 2018; Dirksen, 2015; Duel & De Reuver, 2014; Duel & Dirksen, 2016; Netherlands Veterans Institute, 2017a), and the appreciation society apparently has for them (around 8 out of 10) (Blauw Research, 2013; Bot & Ait Moha, 2018; Bot & Konings, 2019; Konings & Baart, 2020; TOS, 2014, 2015). And it shows the complexity of the challenge of recognition, appreciation, and being understood.

What further complicates this challenge is that an entitlement to societal recognition and appreciation might enhance sentiments of not being understood. After all, recognition and appreciation both imply the recognised and appreciated possess a quality others in society do not have. State policy is implemented in order to increase the recognition and appreciation of veterans in Dutch society, which implies that veterans did something worth remembering and appreciating — but also implies that there is a lack of recognition and appreciation that needs to be addressed. Instead of promoting equality, as Honneth (2007) assumed, it holds out the recognised at a distance from society (McQueen, 2015; Sebrechts, 2018). Civilians are expected to applaud veterans, something they might not usually do for each other. Stressing a distance between civilians and veterans also means stimulating feelings of separation, and consequently of not being understood. So, while recognition and appreciation may acknowledge the veteran's deployment and societal value, both of these constructs also increase the gap

between veterans and society. To make matters even more complex, it is exactly this gap in understanding that is essential to identifying as a veteran, which in turn makes being recognised as a veteran of value.

Even though veterans may never be fully understood by civilians, they do express the desire to be listened to, without feeling judged negatively by others. And even when stereotypes, perceptions of uninterest and ignorance, and feeling judged persist among veterans, they respond with resilience, as this study has found. They are active participants in their own identification, and they make their own choices in how they interact with civilians. That veterans have the space to do this, and can struggle over recognition by presenting themselves at public events, shows that they are in a different position than East Indies veterans in the 1950s. Whereas the experiences of those veterans were largely ignored and they felt like they had to forget their experiences, in contemporary society there are plenty of opportunities to meet fellow veterans, to commemorate losses, to participate in national traditions such as WW2 commemorations, and even to sue the state in court. This all shows that Dutch veterans have improved their place in society. They are not completely ignored or silenced. As Tully (2002, p. 170) put it: 'The freedom to participate directly or vicariously in contests over recognition is just as important [as recognition itself] in creating a sense of belonging'.

7.3 VETERANS: FOREVER IN-BETWEEN?

As I wrote this thesis, I wrestled with the question of where veterans belong in society, if they are inevitably cast as in between one thing and another. I wish to further explicate this notion. Now, looking back on this study, I am under the impression that veterans who left the service embody the so-called civil-military gap. In the end, veterans who left the service (the focus of this study), embody both the civilian as well as the soldier. And if they are both, they are neither one completely. I noticed this in the performance of veterans: Lebanon veterans navigated between being the serious soldier and the happy civilian, while Srebrenica veterans reflected on the deeds of the soldiers they were through the eyes of the civilians they are now. And Uruzgan veterans' identifications rely too heavily on the military to result in a convincing presentation of being in-between. So, performing veterans are neither here nor there, they are in-between.

However, if soldiers are indeed a threat to purity for society, because of their ambiguous position between peace and war, as explained in Chapter Four, why would veterans who left the service be any different, since they also symbolise an ambiguous position between soldier and civilian? This embodiment makes them both more pure than active soldiers who operate in an ambiguous environment, but also more threatening because while they are still marked as ex-combatants, they move freely through society, no lon-

ger kept separate by the institution of the armed forces. So do WW2 commemorations serve to 'purify' the veterans, or confirm stigma, as both these rituals and the presence of veterans remind the audience that war exists, and peace might be contaminated by it at any time?

Adding to this ambiguity are the controversial values around the image of the Dutch as a military nation. Are we peaceniks, cowards, or warriors? This fuzziness around the nations' military identity (see also Klep, 2019d) adds to the uncertainty around societal views of veterans. Do we as society have to view the veterans who served the military as helpers, chickens, or Rambo's? And if it is not clear how to view them exactly, how should we approach them? Are veterans who left the service necessarily stuck in a world of in-betweens, within a category so broadly defined yet so specifically connected to a military deployment? Is formal veterans policy from the Ministry of Defence indeed helping veterans, or does it serve to bridge the gap between the armed forces and society, necessary now that conscription has been suspended? And if so, is it fair to the veterans to leave it up to them to function as that bridge?

This becomes all the more questionable as the inevitable association with mental health issues stigmatises veterans. While I certainly heard stories of veterans for whom identifying as a veteran was the first step on the path of healing mental health problems caused by deployment, I am not sure if it helps in the long term to integrate in society as civilians. As I have argued, specialised veteran health care keeps veterans in a distinct category apart from society. Instead of emphasising the similarities between mental health issues of veterans compared to civilians, its existence suggests that the suffering of veterans is fundamentally different from civilians. Furthermore, if being a veteran is so closely linked to having mental health issues, what is left of the sense of self once one is healed? Can a veteran let go of being an injured person while still continuing to identify as a veteran in the same manner? All of these questions lead me to a controversial dilemma. Is society doing the veterans a favour by formalising their status, or is society doing itself a favour by using veterans in affirming how dirty the job of a soldier is, as apparently no one gets out uncontaminated, i.e., without mental health issues?

Possibilities for a solution to this forever in-between position come from the United Kingdom, where policymakers have defined veterans to be *civilians* in the first place, who might need some special assistance to live their *civilian life*. Formal veteran policy exists to assist them in this reintegration process, instead of emphasising veterans being different from civilians (The strategy of our veterans, 2018).

Finally, to explore my own conscience, I have asked myself if this research will contribute, or has contributed, to the in-between status of veterans? After all, I addressed the people I spoke to as veterans, invited them to discuss their military service and deployment, and then asked them what being a veteran meant to them and what they did to express that. I even inquired if they saw differences between veterans and civilians.

By this, I encouraged my informants to make sense of this formal status, to imagine what a veteran is and to treat that imagination as a reality. Hence, I believe this study may reinforce the forever in-between status of veterans. My conversations with veterans did likely contribute to sense-making around the veteran status, and therefore, indirectly, to defining subjects that are in-between — neither civilians, nor soldiers.

7.4 CONCLUDING REMARKS: IDENTIFYING AS A VETERAN

Returning to the central issue of this thesis, namely, the identification processes among veterans, I conclude that the role of deployment in the narrative, the time elapsed, military context, and perception of societal views all play roles in the construction of veterans. The role of the deployment, in particular when it is described as a disruption, relates to *whether* one identifies as a veteran. This is a two-way street: the deployment being of great importance in the veteran's daily reality leads to the increased likelihood of identifying as a veteran, while identifying as a veteran increases the importance of the deployment in the veteran's life story. Further, the time elapsed since deployment, military context, and perceptions of societal views on veterans and the mission interrelate with the veterans' identification processes. Both time elapsed and perceptions of public opinion particularly play a role in the construction of images of 'the veteran' and in the presentation of self. Military context especially influences the constructed images of 'the veteran', the discourse of sameness and difference, and, together with societal views on the mission, appears to influence the need for recognition as a veteran. Above all, identifying as a veteran is clearly a complex, context-driven, and dynamic process.

The complex interplay between personal and societal attitudes and developments, results in diverse versions of 'the veteran feeling', as also described by the different veterans cited in the prologue of this book. Even though I have clarified the process of identification as a veteran, the 'veteran feeling' itself still remains a little mysterious. As it became clear throughout this study, for veterans, this is a subjective feeling to experience and to act on, and hard to describe in words. Recall how Hans said he did not to know what being a veteran meant, even though he had built an UNIFIL-museum in his backyard. Or Stefanie describing the bond between fellow veterans: 'It is that feeling that they know! So, what you [non-veterans] don't get, that feeling, they do know.' And think of Erik likening this feeling to sharing a certain blood type, something that's both invisible on the outside and runs deep in the veins. However frustrating for a researcher to define, the beauty of being a veteran lies in this inscrutable feeling: a private sentiment which can be shared, not solid but fluid, invisible but tangible, complex to analyse with the mind but simple to know 'in the heart'.





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Interview Topic list

Summary

Samenvatting

Acknowledgements

Curriculum Vitae

INTERVIEW TOPIC LIST

Introduction

- Introduce myself
- Explain topic and framework of the study (as already previously explained by e-mail).
- Explain course and topics of the interview
- This interview is about your personal reflections and experiences. Therefore, there are no right or wrong answers.
- Ask permission to record the interview

Personal characteristics

- Name
- Age
- Educational attainment
- Occupation
- Family situation
- Rank when leaving the service

Personal background

- Family situation during childhood
 - Occupation parents
 - Brothers/sisters
 - School
- Important events before entering the service
 - Positive
 - Negative
- Motivations for enlisting
- Expectations before enlisting

Deployment(s)

- How did you experience the preparation for deployment(s)?
- Expectations before deployment
- Period: month/year
- Location
- Military unit
- Rank

Interview Topic List

- Function
- Type of employment
- Looking back
 - o What do you remember most?
 - Positive memory
 - Negative memory
 - o How do you look back on the deployment(s)?
 - Functioning of own unit
 - Contact with relatives at home
 - Positive/negative sentiments
 - Relationships with fellow soldiers/commanders/subordinates
 - Meaning of the mission
 - o If you had the chance, would you do it all over again?
- Return
 - o What was hard/easy?
 - o Ability to tell one's story
 - o Care
- Leaving the service
 - o How long after the deployment took place
 - o Reason for leaving the service
 - o Transition from soldier to civilian
- Influence deployment on later life
 - o Positive/Negative
 - o How did this influence of deployment change during the years, if at all?
 - o Change in world view?
 - o What did the deployment teach you? Attained competencies/skills
- Reminiscence
 - o In daily life—days on which you are not interviewed about the deployment—how often do you think about the mission?
 - o Collector's items: photo's, medals, equipment, newspaper clippings

Current situation

- Further career
- What is of importance to you in your life?
- Where or with whom do you feel at home?
- How would you describe yourself?
- Did any of these things change before/after military service?
- Did any of these things change under influence of the military deployment?

Veteran identification

- Personally
 - o What does being a veteran mean for you?
 - o What do you do to express that you are a veteran?
 - § (For instance, wearing the V-pin, visit Veterans Days, commemorations, associations, give guest lectures etc)
- Socially
 - o Can you say something about differences between veterans and non-veterans?
 - o How is the contact between fellow veterans of your mission?
 - Is there any contact?
 - With whom: mission in general or only buddies
 - Means of communication
 - Activities/meetings/reunions
 - Friendships
 - o And veterans in general?
 - Is there any contact?
 - With whom: unit/branch/shared hobby/veterans in general
 - Means of communication
 - Activities/meetings/reunions
 - Friendships
 - o How do you view veterans who participated in your mission?
 - Differences/similarities with yourself
 - o How do you view veterans who participated in other missions?
 - Differences/similarities with yourself
- In case not active as a veteran
 - o What do you think of veterans who are active as a veteran?
- In case active as a veteran
 - o What do you think of veterans who are not active as a veteran?

Public opinion

- How do others react to you being a veteran?
 - o Examples
- How do you react to this?
- Can you tell me something about whether and how you try to influence the perceptions of others about you as a veteran and your deployment?
 - o Effect?
- How do you think the wider society perceives veterans?
 - o Why do you think that?
 - o Examples

Interview Topic List

- Can you tell me something about whether and how you try to influence the perceptions of others about veterans and their missions in general?
 - o Effect?
- What do you think of the policy making regarding veterans?
 - o Why do you think that?
- What do you think of media reports on your mission and veterans of your mission?
 - o Why do you think that?
 - o Examples
- What do you think of media reports on veterans and their missions in general?
 - o Why do you think that?
 - o Examples

Closing stage

- I have come nearly to the end of my topic list. Are there any topics that we did not discuss which you think we should still discuss? Is there anything you would like to add, or bring to my attention?
- Why did you want to cooperate with this interview?
- If I quote you in my publication(s), can I have your permission to do so?
- And if yes, would you like me to quote you under your real name or a pseudonym?

Post-interview

What did you think of the interview (questions, order of questions, etc)

What was it like for you to share your story this way?

Did it bring up things that affect your mood? (If yes, and in a negative manner, point to the *Veteranenloket* as central communication point for any veteran related matters)

If you have any further questions regarding this study, please do not hesitate to contact me by e-mail or telephone. Promise to send a summary of the study when finished.

SUMMARY

While the state has formally defined who is a veteran in the Netherlands, little is known about the processes of meaning making around the veteran status among veterans themselves. Yet, veterans are addressed as such by numerous initiatives that are taken to meet their needs in health, finances, and societal recognition and appreciation. Also, a large number of veteran associations based on their unit, deployment, age, or hobby are thriving. What then does being a veteran mean to the people for whom this specific policy has been developed? And, how do they express this meaning in their interactions with wider society? Various studies have implied how the self-images and public images of soldiers and their mission are constructed in interaction with each other during deployment, as well as shortly after the deployment. The question is whether this also applies to images of veterans whose mission took place longer ago and who have left the service. And, if yes, then how does this process unfold in the course of time? Therefore, this study has examined the interrelation between how veterans identify as a veteran and their perceptions of how society perceives and views them as veterans.

In Chapter One, I describe how identification processes are characterised by four elements. First, identification is articulated and negotiated through social interaction. Second, how one identifies depends on the context. Third, the process builds on finding commonality between individuals or group members, while simultaneously defining the differences between 'us' and 'them'. Finally, as a result of the first three elements, the process is never finished: it is constantly under construction by social actors. Consequently, an identity is not a characteristic that people have, but it is something that people do: it is continuously under construction. The term 'identification' reflects both the agency of the actor doing the identifying and the dynamics of this process. One way to construct identification is to tell one's own life story. Given that military deployment is a prerequisite to become a Dutch veteran, military service and deployment are crucial when veterans narrate what it means to be a veteran.

In this context, I have interviewed 47 veterans and complemented these data with observations I made during veteran gatherings and events. The data were collected between November 2016 and May 2019. The interviewed veterans participated in three missions that differ in terms of the period, military context, and public perception. These three missions were Dutchbatt in Lebanon, Dutchbat in Srebrenica (former Yugoslavia) and Task Force Uruzgan in Afghanistan. In Chapter Two, I summarise these missions in further detail. In my analysis, I used an etic approach. I inferred analytical concepts from the semi-structured interviews and observations. Through the analysis, I designed the following division of chapters in this book: how veterans themselves view 'the veteran' and whether they identify with this image or not (Chapter Three); how veterans perceive

Summary

society to look at them (Chapter Four); and how veterans present themselves to society (Chapter Five).

In Chapter Three, I analyse how veterans created an image of 'the veteran' in their minds. They imagined a typical character of what a veteran is and then positioned themselves in relation to that image when narrating whether they identify as a veteran, and if so, what this identification meant to them. The three groups brought up different and also similar images of 'the veteran'. It appeared that the length of time that had passed since the mission took place, as well as the military context and the societal debate around the mission resulted in different images of 'the veteran'. The veterans portrayed the veteran as a so-called '**injured person**' (Lebanon and Srebrenica), as a '**helper**' (Srebrenica), or as a '**dedicated soldier**' (Uruzgan).

The image of the veteran as an **injured person** stimulated veterans with mental health issues to identify as veteran, while it caused veterans without psychological problems to be reluctant to identify as a veteran. Identifying as a veteran increased in importance for veterans with mental health issues because they felt the consequences of their military deployment on a daily basis and they often had fewer options of other types of identification, such as with their current job or with significant relationship roles. Their practitioners were often one of the facilitators of the National Health Care System for Veterans. In this context, their identification as a veteran was relevant. Identifying as an injured veteran was perceived by many as a way of recognizing their issues and taking a first step towards improving their mental health. Further, the Srebrenica veterans in this study who identified as a veteran felt empowered by helping others and viewing themselves as **helpers**. Meanwhile, some of the Srebrenica veterans viewed 'the veteran' merely as a person who claimed to be a helper, and therefore refrained from identifying as a veteran. Finally, among Uruzgan veterans, **military performance, professionalism, and achievements** were dominant in the narratives. Identifying with the military often prevailed over identifying as a veteran, although there was a slow and careful shift visible among some respondents who connected the pride they felt in their military performance to being a veteran. Other Uruzgan veterans viewed the veteran as a person claiming to be a war hero, while not having been through much. These respondents did not identify as a veteran. However, military achievements played a central role in both images among Uruzgan veterans.

Another representation of 'the veteran' that featured in the stories of the Uruzgan veterans was that of the **old man**, which of course contrasted with the veteran as a **dedicated soldier** because old men are no longer active soldiers. This indicates the role of time in the identification processes among veterans. The narrative of Uruzgan veterans about what being a veteran means to them often bore resemblance to the descriptions of Srebrenica and Lebanon veterans of their earlier selves, before they cared about being veterans, which further underlines the role of time. Furthermore, the image of the

veteran as a **dedicated soldier** resembles **'the extraordinary'** and **'the experienced'**, both of these images featured in the narratives of Lebanon and Srebrenica veterans, respectively. All three images refer to the deployment as an exceptional and formative experience, which becomes more exceptional in the narrative as the deployment moves further away in time. A final image that featured in the narratives of all three groups was that of the veteran as a **loyal buddy** — somebody who is there for their buddies, no matter what. I interpreted this image as an 'inheritance' of military culture because social solidarity is stimulated and fostered in the military to ensure that the institution functions properly. Most respondents stated they had never found this social bond in the same strength and shape in the civilian world as they had experienced it among soldiers, except in the veteran community.

Apart from differences and similarities in the constructed images of a veteran, other similarities and differences were visible in the narratives. The distinct role that the deployment played in the narratives of the veterans showed the difference between identification as a veteran (for Lebanon and Srebrenica veterans) and identification with the military (Uruzgan veterans). Among Lebanon and Srebrenica veterans, the deployment was more often described as a disruption in their narrative — an event that encouraged or even forced them to construct a new view of their selves and the world around them. The deployment then functioned as a rite of passage: the young, unknowing soldier left the home country for deployment, was separated from friends and family in a world with different rules and realities; and then returned as a different person, having to find his/her place in their home society. In the narratives of Uruzgan veterans, the deployment is often a less disruptive event. Instead, the military training served as a rite of passage, which formed their military identity, and the deployment served as a confirmation of their self-perception as soldier. This difference can be explained not only by the professionalisation of the armed forces but also by mission context, especially expectations versus reality. It appeared that a deployment that did not fit previous expectations influenced the way in which the veterans narrated their identification: it served as an argument for identifying as a veteran

In Chapter Four, I show how all of the veterans who participated in my study described some level of societal ignorance of the work of armed forces, its missions, and its veterans. Lebanon veterans, who were deployed at the time that conscription was still mandatory, were the most nuanced in the way they thought society viewed the military. Half of them thought that society's attitudes towards the military and veterans had improved over the last decades, while the other half thought that the general public remained uninterested and unaware of the military's work, and therefore of the work that the veterans did. Most Srebrenica veterans in this study agreed with the latter half of the Lebanon veterans. Concerning reactions to their mission in particular, Srebrenica veterans felt judged by society and stereotyped as cowards. Similarly to Srebrenica

Summary

veterans, Uruzgan veterans in this study perceived little public interest or appreciation for the Dutch military, and for veterans in general. Based on the literature, I argue why the job of the soldier can be seen as an 'infamous occupation' or a 'dirty job', leading to a moral stigma that 'sticks' to veterans even after they have left the service. In the Netherlands, there is a common (moral) agreement that it is wrong to use violence, while soldiers are trained to do so. Indeed, veterans in this study saw themselves confronted with stereotypes relating to this moral ambiguity: that of perpetrator or victim. The first stereotype refers to the violence that they may have used, while the second stereotype appeals to the public because it shows the veteran as having equal moral standards compared to the average citizen because they are now suffering from all the immorality they witnessed, underwent or participated in. Hence, the discrepancy between society's self-perception and the nature of the military complicates the relationship between both parties.

While veterans stated they thought it was a wasted effort to try to convince civilians who thought in terms of these stereotypes, in their narrative they did try to refute mission specific stereotypes. For instance, they often implied that they had done something necessary for either the local population or the Dutch population. The three groups also had in common that they used some sort of grammar of Orientalisation to distance themselves from judgemental civilians. When feeling misunderstood, the veterans tended to keep their story to themselves or adjust their deployment story to what they thought the public wanted or needed to hear. They shared the actual deployment experience with each other, while also communicating the feeling of being misunderstood in society. In this way, external judgements increased group cohesion, while group cohesion also stimulated the feeling of being judged by outsiders.

Although there was much similarity among the three groups on this topic of societal views of veterans, the groups differed in what they saw as the root cause of ignorance in society — this was influenced by both the length of time that had passed since the mission took place and the public debate concerning the mission in which they participated. In Chapter Five, I describe how these differences in perceptions influenced the way veterans presented themselves to the wider society. For Srebrenica and Lebanon veterans, the social settings in which they showed themselves as veterans were the same in general, yet the effects that they wished to obtain by their presentation differed. Most Srebrenica veterans desired to repair their public reputation, while for Lebanon veterans the goal was foremost to be visible because they felt forgotten by the general public. Therefore, their presentation was more directed at fun and light-heartedness. Among Uruzgan veterans, there did seem to be an underlying wish for interest and recognition but the connection to their military identification was making them reluctant to present themselves as veterans. Again, the time that had elapsed between the deployment and the present can be of influence here. Among those who presented themselves as veter-

ans, May 4 and 5 rallies — commemorating the Second World War and celebrating the nation's liberation — were important opportunities to make an appearance. Again, morality plays a role, as these events were an ideal setting to show that veterans represent the good, while connecting with society by participating in broadly rooted traditions.

In the conclusion, I summarize that the identification process among veterans is influenced by time, mission context and societal perception. When giving meaning to being a veteran, two themes came to the fore in all narratives: reflection on what the narrator has done right or wrong throughout their lives and talk about mental health issues. Thus, moral reflection and the association between veterans and mental health issues, whether this association is desired by the narrator or not, are inevitably linked to the identification processes among veterans. I argue that both themes are related to the moral stigma that society attributes to the military profession, and therefore, to veterans. The resulting sentiments among veterans of being misunderstood or undervalued by society serve as important building blocks in the identification process as a veteran because these sentiments create the need for a discourse of 'us' versus 'them' and unite veterans as a group since they understand each other. However, whether the veterans finally identify as a veteran depends not only on feeling misunderstood by others but also on the image of 'the veteran' that they have constructed and whether they themselves identify with this portrayal. This image is influenced by time, mission context and public perceptions of the mission. How veterans connect to this representation personally is subject to personal circumstances. Both personal context and public opinion on the military mission that the veteran participated in can change over time. In sum, perceived societal views play a role in identification as a veteran, as do time and mission context.

In the final part of this thesis, I reflect on what the findings of this study imply for policy making, further research and for veterans themselves. The Veterans Act aims to provide care to veterans and their relatives, and to stimulate recognition and appreciation of veterans by society. While these two parts of the policy, which are often described as 'two pillars', suggest two separate elements, both are connected to each other and both emerged from concerns for the health and wellbeing of Dutch veterans. Certainly, this concern should not be rejected altogether, however, there should be an awareness of the undesirable side effects of this concern, such as the intensification of the stereotype of the suffering veteran. Academic researchers who study Dutch veterans should also be aware of this side effect. For the encouragement of recognition and appreciation, it is important to acknowledge that recognition does not automatically imply appreciation. Even when appreciation is given, this is subjective: a gesture of appreciation may be interpreted differently by the receiver. The experience that makes a person a veteran – the military deployment – creates a unique bond with fellow veterans while at the same time creating a distance from civilians. While identification as a veteran may help veterans who experience difficulties in life, on the longer term it may also hinder, rather

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than promote, the reintegration of veterans into society. Entitlement to societal recognition and appreciation, intended to close the gap, might enhance feelings of separation among veterans because it puts those deserving recognition and appreciation at a distance from those giving the recognition and appreciation. Thus, the possibility exists that veterans are kept in a perpetual space in which they are neither civilians nor soldiers, embodying the civil–military gap.

SAMENVATTING

Sinds 1990 is in Nederland de veteranenstatus geformaliseerd en worden allerlei initiatieven ontplooid om aan de behoeften van veteranen op het gebied van gezondheid, financiën en erkenning en waardering tegemoet te komen. Daarnaast bestaan er vele veteranenorganisaties die bijvoorbeeld gebaseerd zijn op eenheid, departement, uitzending, leeftijd of gedeelde hobby, zoals motorrijden of duiken. Er is formeel beleid rond veteranen en de veteranenwereld zelf is uitgebreid en levendig. Terwijl veteranen door beleidsmakers en organisaties als groep benaderd worden, is er weinig bekend over wat veteraan zijn voor veteranen zelf betekent. Hoe geven veteranen zelf betekenis aan de veteranenstatus? Verschillende studies hebben geïmpliceerd dat het zelfbeeld en het publieke beeld van militairen en hun missie in interactie met elkaar ontstaan gedurende de uitzending en kort daarna. De vraag is of hetzelfde opgaat voor veteranen die niet meer werkzaam zijn als militair en voor wie de missie langer geleden is, en zo ja, hoe dit proces zich ontvouwt. Daarom richtte mijn onderzoek zich op de relatie tussen hoe veteranen zich identificeren als veteraan en hun opvattingen over hoe de maatschappij kijkt naar veteranen.

In hoofdstuk één beschrijf ik op basis van de literatuur vier kenmerken van identificatieprocessen. Het eerste kenmerk is sociale interactie. Het tweede kenmerk is de contextafhankelijkheid van het proces. Het derde kenmerk is het vinden en benoemen van overeenkomsten en verschillen. Ten slotte, als resultaat van de voorgaande drie elementen, is het vierde kenmerk dat het proces nooit echt ten einde is: sociale actoren, context van interactie en gevonden overeenkomsten en verschillen veranderen door de tijd heen. Een identiteit is daarom niet iets wat mensen hebben: het is iets wat mensen doen en iets dat continu geconstrueerd en geproduceerd wordt. Daarom heb ik gekozen voor het woord identificatieproces: dit woord laat zien dat het een actief construct is, in plaats van een statisch gegeven. Een manier waarop individuen dit proces vormgeven, is het vertellen van een levensverhaal. Voor veteranen is de militaire dienst en hun uitzending onderdeel van hun levensverhaal. Het verleden (de militaire uitzending) geeft betekenis aan het heden (de veteranenstatus).

Voor dit onderzoek heb ik 47 veteranen geïnterviewd en de data van de interviews heb ik aangevuld met observaties tijdens veteranenbijeenkomsten en -evenementen. De dataverzameling vond plaats tussen november 2016 en mei 2019. De geïnterviewden hebben deelgenomen aan drie missies die verschillen qua periode, militaire context en publieke perceptie. De drie missies zijn Dutchbatt in Libanon, Dutchbat in Srebrenica (voormalig Joegoslavië) en Task Force Uruzgan in Afghanistan. In hoofdstuk twee omschrijf ik de achtergronden van deze missies. De verhalen van de veteranen van deze drie missies heb ik vervolgens met elkaar vergeleken. In mijn analyse heb ik een *etic* benadering gebruikt, aangezien ik analytische concepten heb afgeleid uit de interviews

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en observaties tijdens veteranenbijeenkomsten en -evenementen. Vanuit de analyse ben ik tot de volgende indeling van de hoofdstukken gekomen: hoe veteranen zelf kijken naar 'de veteraan' en zich daar al dan niet mee identificeren (hoofdstuk drie), hoe veteranen ervaren dat de maatschappij naar hen kijkt (hoofdstuk vier) en hoe veteranen zichzelf laten zien aan de maatschappij (hoofdstuk vijf).

In hoofdstuk drie laat ik zien dat veteranen een beeld van 'de veteraan' creëerden en lieten figureren in hun narratief. Ze stelden zich een typisch karakter voor die stond voor 'de veteraan' en positioneerden zich in relatie tot dat beeld wanneer ze vertelden of ze zich identificeerden als veteraan en wat dit voor hen betekende. De drie onderzoeksgroepen brachten zowel verschillende als vergelijkbare beelden van 'de veteraan' naar voren. Wat een rol speelde bij de constructie van deze beelden was de tijd die was verstreken sinds de missie plaatsvond, de militaire context van de missie en het maatschappelijk debat rond de missie. Libanon- en Srebrenicaveteranen stelden de veteraan vaak voor als zogenaamde '**gewonde**'. Daarnaast was een kenmerkend beeld van 'de veteraan' onder Srebrenicaveteranen dat van de veteraan als '**helper**'. Voor Uruzganveteranen was de '**toegewijde soldaat**' een kenmerkend beeld.

Deze drie kenmerkende representaties hadden consequenties voor het identificeren als veteraan en vaak ook een schaduwversie, namelijk onder veteranen die zich niet identificeerden als veteraan. Een consequentie van identificeren als **helpers** was dat Srebrenicaveteranen zich *empowered* voelden door anderen te helpen. De schaduwversie van de helper kwam ook voor, onder veteranen die 'de veteraan' vooral zagen als iemand die deed alsof hij een altruïstische **helper** was, maar in werkelijkheid weinig tot niets deed om daadwerkelijk verschil te maken. Onder Uruzganveteranen waren **militaire prestaties en professionaliteit** dominant in de verhalen. Identificatie met het leger prevaleerde dan ook boven identificatie als veteraan, hoewel er een langzame en voorzichtige verschuiving zichtbaar was onder voormalig **toegewijde soldaten** die hun trots op militaire prestaties begonnen te verbinden aan de veteranenstatus. Er waren ook Uruzganveteranen die 'de veteraan' vooral zagen als iemand die deed alsof hij een echte krijger was, maar in werkelijkheid niet veel had meegemaakt. In beide gevallen speelden **militaire prestaties** een belangrijke rol. Het beeld van de veteraan als **gewond persoon** ten slotte stimuleerde veteranen met psychische problemen om zich als veteraan te identificeren, terwijl de afwezigheid van psychische problemen ervoor zorgde dat veteranen terughoudend waren om zich als veteraan te identificeren. Voor veteranen met psychische problemen was identificatie als veteraan belangrijk, omdat de gevolgen van de uitzending voor hen relevanter waren in het dagelijks leven en ze vaak minder opties hadden voor andere manieren van identificeren, zoals het identificeren met de huidige baan of met belangrijke relationele rollen. Tijdens de behandeling van hun problemen werden ze vaak behandeld door één van de organisaties aangesloten bij het Landelijk Zorgsysteem veteranen (LZV), wat voor een extra context zorgde waarin

het veteraan zijn relevant was. Het identificeren als veteraan werd door deze veteranen vaak gezien als een eerste stap in het erkennen van hun problemen en ook als een richtingaanwijzer wat betreft hun hulpzoekgedrag.

Naast de drie kenmerkende representaties van 'de veteraan' kwamen er in elke groep ook andere beelden van 'de veteraan' naar voren. In de verhalen van Uruzganveteranen kwam de veteraan als **oude man** naar voren. Dit staat uiteraard in contrast met de veteraan als **toegewijde soldaat**, aangezien oude mannen geen actieve soldaten meer zijn. Vaak gaven veteranen die dit beeld hadden aan dat zij zich mogelijk in de toekomst wel als veteraan zullen identificeren, wanneer zij zelf ouder worden – dit bevestigt de rol van tijd in het identificatieproces. De rol van tijd in het identificatieproces van veteranen werd verder zichtbaar in de gelijkenissen tussen de verhalen van Uruzganveteranen over wat het voor hen betekent om veteraan te zijn en de beschrijvingen van Libanon- en Srebrenicaveteranen van hun vroegere zelf, voordat ze erom gaven dat zij veteraan zijn. Verder leek het beeld van de veteraan als **toegewijde soldaat** enigszins op '**de buitengewone**' en '**degene met levenservaring**', welke voorkwamen in respectievelijk de verhalen van Libanon- en van Srebrenicaveteranen. Alle drie de beschrijvingen verwezen naar de uitzending als uitzonderlijke en vormende ervaring, die in het levensverhaal uitzonderlijker wordt naarmate de uitzending verder weg is in de tijd, terwijl het vormende aspect ervan ook in de loop van de tijd kan toe- of afnemen. Een laatste beeld dat in de verhalen van alle drie de groepen terugkwam, was dat van de veteraan als een **trouwe vriend**, iemand die er voor zijn maatjes is, wat er ook gebeurt. Ik interpreteerde dit beeld als een 'erfenis' van de militaire cultuur, aangezien sociale cohesie in het leger wordt gestimuleerd om de instelling goed te laten functioneren. De meeste respondenten gaven aan dat ze deze sociale band in de burgermaatschappij nooit in dezelfde sterkte en vorm hebben aangetroffen als in dienst, met uitzondering van de veteranengemeenschap.

Behalve verschillen en overeenkomsten in de geconstrueerde beelden van een veteraan, waren er ook andere overeenkomsten en verschillen zichtbaar in de levensverhalen. De duidelijke rol die de uitzending speelde in de levensverhalen van de veteranen toonde het verschil tussen identificatie als veteraan (voor Libanon- en Srebrenicaveteranen) en identificatie met het leger (Uruzganveteranen). Onder Libanon- en Srebrenicaveteranen werd de uitzending vaker beschreven als een verstoring in hun algehele levensverhaal – een gebeurtenis die hen aanmoedigde of zelfs noodzaakte een andere opvatting van zichzelf en de wereld om hen heen vorm te geven. De uitzending is dan een *rite of passage*: de onwetende, jonge soldaat ging op uitzending, was daar in een andere wereld met andere regels, en kwam terug als veranderd persoon die opnieuw een plek moest zien te vinden in de samenleving waar hij oorspronkelijk vandaan kwam. In de verhalen van Uruzganveteranen was de uitzending vaak een minder disruptieve gebeurtenis. In plaats van de uitzending, was voor hen de militaire training een *rite of passage*, die

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hun identificatie als militair heeft gevormd. De uitzending was een bevestiging van die identiteit. Dit verschil kan verklaard worden door de professionalisering van het leger, maar ook verschil in verwachting versus realiteit. Het leek erop dat een inzet die niet aan eerdere verwachtingen voldeed in het levensverhaal diende als argument om zich als veteraan te identificeren.

In hoofdstuk vier omschrijf ik hoe alle veteranen die deelnamen aan dit onderzoeksproject een zekere mate van maatschappelijke onwetendheid over het werk van het leger, haar missies en haar veteranen ervoeren. Libanonveteranen, ingezet in de tijd dat dienstplicht nog een gegeven was, waren hierover genuanceerder dan de andere twee groepen. De helft van hen dacht namelijk dat de houding van de samenleving ten opzichte van het leger en veteranen de afgelopen decennia was verbeterd, terwijl de andere helft dacht dat het grote publiek ongeïnteresseerd bleef en niet op de hoogte was van het werk van het leger - en dus van het werk dat veteranen deden. De meeste Srebrenicaveteranen waren het eens met de tweede helft van de Libanonveteranen. Wat betreft de reacties op hun missie in het bijzonder, voelden Srebrenicaveteranen zich veroordeeld door de samenleving en gestereotypeerd als lafaards. Uruzganveteranen ervoeren tevens weinig publieke belangstelling of waardering voor het Nederlandse leger en voor veteranen in het algemeen. Op basis van de literatuur heb ik beargumenteerd waarom het werk van de soldaat kan worden gezien als een 'berucht beroep' of 'vuil werk', inclusief een moreel stigma dat aan veteranen 'kleeft', zelfs nadat ze de dienst hebben verlaten. In de Nederlandse samenleving is er een algemene (morele) afspraak dat het verkeerd is om geweld te gebruiken, terwijl soldaten worden opgeleid om geweld, indien nodig, zo effectief mogelijk toe te passen. Veteranen in dit onderzoek zagen zich inderdaad geconfronteerd met stereotypen die gerelateerd zijn aan deze morele dubbelzinnigheid: die van dader of slachtoffer. Het eerste stereotype verwijst naar het geweld dat ze mogelijk hebben gebruikt, terwijl het tweede stereotype het publiek aanspreekt omdat het laat zien dat de veteraan dezelfde morele normen heeft in vergelijking met de gemiddelde burger, aangezien hij nu lijdt onder alles wat hij heeft meegemaakt, heeft ondergaan of waaraan hij heeft deelgenomen.

Terwijl veteranen zeiden dat ze het verspilde moeite vonden om burgers die in deze stereotypen dachten, van iets anders te overtuigen, probeerden ze in hun verhaal wel degelijk om stereotypen te weerleggen. Daarbij impliceerden ze vaak dat ze iets hebben gedaan dat nodig is voor de lokale bevolking of de Nederlandse bevolking. De veteranen uit de verschillende groepen hadden gemeen dat ze een *Grammar of Orientalisation* gebruikten - wij versus zij - om afstand te nemen van veroordelende burgers. En als ze zich onbegrepen voelden, hadden veteranen de neiging om hun verhaal voor zichzelf te houden of hun uitzendingsverhaal aan te passen aan wat ze dachten dat het publiek wilde of moest horen. Het eigenlijke verhaal van de uitzending deelden ze meestal met elkaar, waarbij zij ook het gevoel van maatschappelijk onbegrip met elkaar deelden. Op

deze manier vergrootten externe oordelen de groepscohesie, terwijl groepscohesie ook het gevoel van beoordeeld te worden door buitenstaanders stimuleerde.

Hoewel er veel overeenkomsten waren tussen de drie groepen over de maatschappelijke opvattingen over veteranen, verschilden de groepen van elkaar in wat zij zagen als de belangrijkste oorzaak van onwetendheid in de samenleving. Dit werd beïnvloed door zowel de tijd die was verstreken sinds de missie plaatsvond als het publieke debat over de missie waaraan zij deelnamen. Hoofdstuk vijf laat zien hoe deze verschillen in percepties de manier waarop veteranen zichzelf presenteerden aan de bredere samenleving beïnvloedden. Voor Srebrenica- en Libanonveteranen waren de situaties waarin ze zich als veteraan lieten zien over het geheel genomen hetzelfde, maar verschilden de effecten die ze met deze presentatie wilden bereiken. De meeste Srebrenicaveteranen wilden hun publieke reputatie herstellen, terwijl voor Libanonveteranen het doel vooral was om zichtbaar te zijn, aangezien zij zich door het grote publiek vergeten voelden. Daarom was hun presentatie meer gericht op plezier en luchtigheid. Onder Uruzganveteranen leek er een onderliggende wens voor publieke interesse en erkenning te bestaan, maar de connectie met hun militaire identificatie maakte hen huiverig om zich als veteranen te presenteren. Wederom kan hier de tijd die is verstreken tussen de inzet en het heden een rol spelen. Onder degenen die zich presenteerden als veteraan, waren 4 en 5 mei bijeenkomsten, het herdenken van de Tweede Wereldoorlog en het vieren van de bevrijding, belangrijke gelegenheden om zich te laten zien. Hier speelt opnieuw moraliteit een rol, aangezien deze evenementen de ideale setting vormden om te laten zien dat de veteraan het goede voorstaat, en de verbinding met de samenleving zoekt door deel te nemen aan breed gewortelde tradities.

In de conclusie stel ik vast dat het identificatieproces onder veteranen beïnvloed wordt door tijd, context van de missie en maatschappelijke perceptie. In alle verhalen van de respondenten over het identificeren als veteraan kwamen twee thema's naar voren: de eigen reflectie op wat de verteller in zijn leven goed of fout heeft gedaan en psychische problemen. Een morele reflectie en de associatie tussen veteraan en psychische problemen, of dat nou als een wenselijke associatie wordt gezien of niet, hoort dus onmiskenbaar bij het identificatieproces van veteranen. Beide thema's zijn mijns inziens onlosmakelijk verbonden met het morele stigma dat vanuit de maatschappij aan het beroep van militair kleeft en dus ook aan veteranen. De daaraan gerelateerde gevoelens van verkeerd begrepen of ondergewaardeerd worden door de samenleving zijn belangrijke bouwstenen in het identificatieproces als veteraan, omdat het de noodzaak creëert voor een discours van 'wij' versus 'zij' en veteranen als groep verenigt omdat zij elkaar wel begrijpen. Of veteranen zich ook daadwerkelijk als veteraan identificeren, hangt niet alleen af van het wel of niet goed gedaan hebben, het ervaren van problemen of het gevoel niet begrepen te worden door de samenleving, maar ook van het beeld van 'de veteraan' dat zij zelf hebben opgebouwd en of zij zich met dit beeld identificeren. Dit

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beeld wordt beïnvloed door tijd, karakter van de militaire missie en maatschappelijke perceptie van de missie. Hoe veteranen zich persoonlijk verbinden met deze representatie, is onderhevig aan de persoonlijke context, die natuurlijk in de loop der tijd kan veranderen, net als de publieke opinie over de militaire missie overigens.

Ter afsluiting heb ik de bevindingen van mijn onderzoek in een breder perspectief geplaatst. In de Veteranenwet staat het verlenen van zorg aan veteranen en hun naasten en het stimuleren van erkenning en waardering van veteranen door de samenleving centraal. Deze twee onderdelen van het beleid zijn beiden voortgekomen uit bezorgdheid over de gezondheid en het welzijn van Nederlandse veteranen. Hoewel deze bezorgdheid natuurlijk geapprecieerd mag worden, is het belangrijk om de ogen niet te sluiten voor een mogelijk ongewenst bijeffect: het stereotype van de lijdende veteraan. Ook degenen die academisch onderzoek doen naar veteranen, dienen zich bewust te zijn van dit neveneffect. Wat betreft het stimuleren van erkenning en waardering, is het belangrijk in te zien dat erkenning niet automatisch waardering impliceert. Zelfs wanneer het leidt tot waardering, is dit subjectief: een gebaar van waardering kan door de ontvanger anders worden geïnterpreteerd. De ervaring die iemand tot veteraan maakt – de militaire inzet – scheidt een unieke band met medeveteranen en creëert tegelijkertijd een afstand ten opzichte van de burgermaatschappij. Hoewel identificatie als veteraan een hulpmiddel kan zijn voor veteranen die problemen ervaren naar aanleiding van de uitzending, kan het op langere termijn de re-integratie van veteranen in de samenleving ook belemmeren, in plaats van bevorderen. Het recht op maatschappelijke erkenning en waardering, bedoeld om de kloof te dichten, zou juist de perceptie van afstand kunnen versterken, omdat het degenen die erkenning en waardering verdienen op een afstand plaatst van degenen die de erkenning en waardering geven. Zo bestaat de mogelijkheid dat veteranen in een eeuwige tussenruimte worden gehouden waarin ze noch burger, noch soldaat zijn, en op die manier de civiel-militaire kloof belichamen.

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CURRICULUM VITAE

Yvon de Reuver (1985) started her Bachelor studies in Cultural Anthropology and Sociology of non-Western societies at Utrecht University in 2003. She enrolled in the Master International Development Studies at Wageningen University, from which she graduated in 2010. During her Master's, she worked as a research assistant at the Veterans Institute, conducting survey research into the opinions of veterans on the Netherlands' Veterans Day. After graduation, she was employed as knowledge officer at the non-governmental organization Cordaid. In 2012, she returned as a researcher to the Netherlands' Veterans Institute, where she worked on several research projects concerning the opinions of veterans on veteran policy making and initiatives, and veterans' health and wellbeing. She also contributed to the organization of the annual Veterans Lecture and authored articles for veterans magazine Checkpoint and the website of the Veterans Institute. In 2016, she started a PhD project on veterans' identification processes and their interrelation with perceived public perceptions, under supervision of Prof. dr. Toon van Meijl at Radboud University in Nijmegen. This project resulted in this dissertation.