

Shifting images. The public image of Dutch veterans, past and present.

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Introduction

There are some 150,000 veterans living in the Netherlands currently. Of the more than 550,000 military personnel who served in the period between 1940 and 1962 during the Second World War, the Korean War or in the war of decolonisation in Indonesia, some 100,000 veterans are still alive. Of the over 80,000 military personnel who have participated in peace operations or other out of area operations since 1979, 50,000 have left the armed forces.¹ These people therefore also come under the category of Dutch veterans. By virtue of the services performed for their country and their distinctive experiences, veterans and their military past have formed an interesting subject for journalists for as long as the past sixty years. It has to be said, however, that the impression exists, particularly among the Dutch veterans themselves, that the Dutch media have never been conspicuous for their attention or appreciation for veterans. Veterans also largely share the perception that failures or misconduct from their military past have traditionally been made much of in the media, much more in fact than the sacrifices they made or the deprivations they suffered. On the basis of a literature study and an analysis of recent reports in newspapers and magazines, we will show in this article that the impression is incorrect. This will become clear both from a short examination of the image of veterans represented in the media in the past century and from a study of recent reports on veterans in Dutch newspapers and journals.

From hero to perpetrator

Immediately following the Second World War, the media shared the traditional attitude towards veterans. Although the Dutch armed forces had enjoyed only limited success, the country and the media cherished their heroes – those defenders of the fatherland who in 1940 with great courage had vainly resisted a superior enemy; the members of the resistance who had risked their lives continuing the struggle; and the soldiers and sailors who had fought and sailed alongside their Allies, and eventually triumphed. There was a classic tale of sacrifice and hardship, a tale that was retold regularly during commemorations and in the media. These veterans were heroes, and their need for societal appreciation was clearly fulfilled. Occasionally, they received our admiration, too, but never to excess. But there was never any special aftercare for veterans. After all, heroes don't suffer from psychological problems, do they?

¹ Veteraneninstituut, *Factsheet 2: Veteranenbeleid* (juli 2005).

For the almost 200,000 veterans who fought in the war of decolonisation in Indonesia, in the second half of the nineteen forties, the situation was different.² Although on their return to their homes in the Netherlands they were generally warmly received, this reception had little to do with admiration, and more to do with relief. Relief that sons, fathers, brothers and friends had come back safely. Society, including the press, had a positive attitude towards these veterans³, but saw no reason to express any particular admiration. After all, the war had been lost. After 400 years, the Netherlands had lost its crown colony – the Netherlands East Indies. Although the first criticisms of the cruel behaviour of some soldiers already emerged during the conflict itself, the lost war did not yet become subject of intense public debate. The trauma of the loss of the East Indies (Indonesia) was stifled, and the law-abiding media left it at that. The servicemen involved in this national trauma received nothing more than practical assistance to help them pick up their civilian lives. This time, there was neither recognition nor veterans care, only sympathy. After all, a tragic hero is not a real hero, and should be happy with his survival and lot.

Twenty years later – in 1969 – the media were clearly less law-abiding. The Dutch children of the Sixties felt the time had come for a public discussion of the ‘Dutch Vietnam’. Various media went in search of and found veterans who testified in the press and on television as to how bad the policy had been at the time, and how cruelly some members of the Dutch armed forces had acted. Above all the statements on television about war crimes had a tremendous impact. After all, television was the national pulpit. This time, in 1969, the cameras were turned on the veterans of the East Indies war, and their role in war crimes. The discussions in the media and in politics went on for months, merely strengthening the image of these veterans as potential perpetrators of war crimes. Doubts suddenly emerged about this group, the largest ever group of Dutch war veterans. And those doubts refused to go away, and continued to be broadcast regularly, in the media, for more than two decades. After a few ineffectual protests, the veterans of the East Indies accepted the inevitable. Never having been welcomed as heroes in the first place, now they were identified as perpetrators. They felt condemned without a fair trial.

From perpetrator to victim

For the East Indies veterans, however, the legal issue still had to be resolved. Although they had initially been the main prosecutors, the media gradually grew into their role as defenders of these veterans of the East Indies. This was partly to do with the fact that curiosity got the better of them. How could such an innocent conflict in Indonesia – which in the Dutch collective memory was more a sort of police action interspersed with a number of large military campaigns – have caused these Dutch boys to commit war crimes or use excessive violence? The existing innocent picture of the struggle was apparently incorrect. Various journalists investigated the military actions. They found out that the conscripts of the time had

² M. Elands, ‘Van dader tot slachtoffer? De Indiëveteranen in samenleving, publiciteit en geschiedschrijving’, in: M. Elands (ed) *Uit Indonesië. De erfenis van de soevereiniteitsoverdracht*. (Den Haag, 2000). Stef Scagliola, *Last van de oorlog. De Nederlandse oorlogsmisdaden in Indonesië en hun verwerking* (Dissertatie Erasmus Universiteit, 2002).

been given an impossible task, and had wound up in a cruel and hopeless guerrilla war. Through their investigations into military matters, via the theme of war crimes, the media slowly came round to the side of the veterans. The East Indies veterans then, above all, came to be seen as the victims of a failed government policy.

In the 1980s, this became the prevailing media image, strengthened further by increased media attention for long-term or delayed psychological consequences of war experiences and fed by the rising 'victim culture'. It emerged that many thousands of these veterans were still suffering from considerable and permanent psychological disorders. The roles were suddenly reversed. Instead of defendants, the East Indies veterans became prosecutors. They prosecuted the government for negligence – a government which had sent them on a pointless mission, and had subsequently withheld both recognition and veterans care. In this process, the media acted as defence counsel for the veterans. Towards the end of the 1980s, under combined pressure from the veterans and the media, the government promised to mend its ways. A national monument was erected, with an annual commemoration, and financial compensation and veterans care were introduced. Although the veterans still had the stigma of 'minor perpetrators', they had also become somewhat tragic heroes, and above all victims.

In the same way that the image of the veteran as a perpetrator remained strong for almost twenty years, the image of the veteran as a victim also appeared highly enduring. Journalists recognised the strength and endurance of this image, and in the nineties continued to hunt for stories that confirm just that image. To put it more precisely, also amongst modern veterans – mostly veterans of peace operations – they stood open for and went in search of similar stories. 'Good news is no news'. So journalists seemed to have a distinct preference for dysfunctional veterans and veterans with post-traumatic stress disorders, as discussion partners or main characters in reports. This was also motivated by the fact that, generally speaking, peacekeeping operations do not produce heroes. There are no hard-won victories and apparently no major national interests are served by such operations. In the absence of any rich breeding ground for stories of heroes and perpetrators, there was all the more space for stories of victims.

Still a victim?

On the basis of the existing literature, earlier research into the image of East Indies veterans and a quick scan of the press reports in the 1990s, the image of the veteran as a victim seems to have become the dominant picture in that decade. To establish whether this is still the dominant image in our time, we have examined the press reports on veterans over the period between 2000 and 2004. Owing to the extensive weekly press reviews of defence-related articles compiled by the Public Information Service of the Ministry of Defence⁴, the lion's share of the articles on veterans published in newspapers and

³ Dr. Hans Meijer, 'Zo snel mogelijk gedumt? De opvang van de uit Indië teruggekeerde KL-militairen, 1948-1951.', in: Martin Elands (ed), *Oost west, thuis best? De opvang van uit Nederlands-Indië teruggekeerde militairen 1948-1951* (Doorn, 2004).

⁴ Knipselnieuws 2000-2004, Collectie Nederlands Instituut voor Militaire Historie (Den Haag/Nederland).

magazines, the selection of articles was easily made.⁵ The relevant articles were subdivided into three main categories: (1) articles in which veterans are the main focus, (2) articles in which veterans are a secondary focus and (3) articles in which the theme of veterans is touched on in passing or indirectly. Within these three main categories, a further subdivision was made on the basis of the tone of the article with respect to veterans (positive, negative or neutral) and on the basis of the image of the veterans evoked in the article (hero, perpetrator, victim or neutral) to a strong or lesser extent. It should be noted that the qualifications of 'hero', 'perpetrator' and 'victim' are to be interpreted in the broadest sense of the word, as archetypes. By 'hero' we mean that veterans or their former military role are assessed positively, while the category of 'perpetrator' does not only cover articles on war crimes, but also articles in which veterans are criticised on account of negligence or underperformance. A total of 907 articles were devoted directly or indirectly to the subject of veterans. Most articles projected an unambiguous image of veterans. Over one hundred articles, however, were constructed on a combination of two images. This explains the higher figures in the tables.

The table below, which covers all 907 articles, shows that the media – perhaps to the surprise of some Dutch veterans – in most cases write about veterans in a positive tone and that the image of the victim is indeed most present in these articles. The image of the veteran as hero is, however, also expressed with striking force.

	HERO	PERPETRATOR	VICTIM	NEUTRAL	
POSITIVE	292	-	264	28	584
NEGATIVE	-	85	16	1	102
NEUTRAL	25	32	143	127	327
	317	117	423	156	

Naturally, the image of the veteran in Dutch newspapers and magazines is most strongly determined by the articles which focus on veterans as their main or secondary theme and to a far lesser extent by articles which touch on veterans indirectly. These two main categories together lead to the following picture:

	HERO	PERPETRATOR	VICTIM	NEUTRAL	
POSITIVE	250	-	180	7	437
NEGATIVE	-	40	12	1	53
NEUTRAL	18	14	123	41	196
	268	54	315	49	

The picture provided by the two main categories is hardly different from the overall picture. There is a difference, however, in that the image of the veteran as hero is even a little stronger here. On the basis of these results, it can be said that although the image of the veteran as victim (health complaints, victim of

⁵ Collectie Kennis- en onderzoekscentrum, Veteraneninstituut (Doorn/Nederland).

circumstance or victim on the basis of attention and appreciation wrongly withheld) is strongest here, it is not the dominant image. To be able to assess the various images more in detail, we examined the relationship between the image evoked by the articles and the specific group of veterans discussed in the articles. That relationship sheds a great deal of light on the issue indeed. Of the 'hero articles' over sixty per cent appears to concern the relatively small group of veterans from the Second World War. Within the 'perpetrator articles', a similarly dominant role (sixty per cent) is played by the Srebrenica veterans, while the 'victim articles' category is clearly headed by veterans from peacekeeping operations (particularly Lebanon, Cambodia and Bosnia/Srebrenica), with over seventy-five per cent.

On the basis of these results we can conclude that the veterans from the Second World War have retained their status of hero in the media, also in the face of the gradually changing media reports, and that the younger veteran categories are currently mainly described as victims. Another conclusion is the following: the veterans from the war of decolonisation in Indonesia, which determined the image of veterans for years and years (1969-1995), have now virtually disappeared from view. With between 5 to 10 per cent within all categories, they play a minor role. In the years between 2000 and 2004, 'Srebrenica', 'the Second World War' and '(physical or psychological) health complaints of peace operations veterans' constituted the dominant veterans themes in Dutch newspapers and magazines.

Conclusions and discussion

The results from the investigation into the image of veterans in the newspapers and magazines (2000-2004) corroborate the picture of the 20th century of the media, on the whole, commenting favourably on veterans. The only exception is formed by the numerous articles published in the years between 1969 and 1985 on the war crimes committed in the former Netherlands East Indies. It is even conceivable that the small number of articles published in the period between 2000 and 2004 with a negative tone and projecting an image of the veteran as perpetrator will decrease further in the near future. All the more so, as this type of article has proved to be strongly related to the categories of veterans from the war of decolonisation in Indonesia and Srebrenica. The theme of the former Netherlands East Indies has virtually disappeared from Dutch newspapers and magazines, while Srebrenica has currently lost a great deal of its former 'perpatrator news value' following the completion of the parliamentary inquiry in 2003.

The image of veterans projected by the media in the years between 2000 and 2004 also fits in precisely with the developments described in this article in respect of the image of veterans in the 20th century. From the second half of the 1980s, the image of the veteran as victim has become the dominant image, even though the image as hero still captures the imagination. This image, however, appears to be strongly related to the Second World War. Although in the past few years this war has made a strong comeback in terms of media attention with the 60th commemoration of D-day and Operation Market Garden, as well as the death of the Dutch icon of the Second World War, Prince Bernhard, media attention is expected to decrease in the coming years. With regard to the image of veterans in general, it should be observed that there is a close connection not only with developments over time (from 1945 to

the present), but also with specific wars and/or conflicts. Given the fact that the Second World War is expected to figure less and less prominently in the media, the image of the veteran as victim, which was strong in the first place, will become truly dominant in the future.

Veterans have been increasingly portrayed as victims in Dutch society for the past twenty years. Without a doubt, this will affect the image of veterans in the media. This was confirmed by a recent public opinion poll. As much as seventy per cent of the Dutch population agreed with the statement put to them that a majority of our veterans have suffered psychological damage.⁶ In public opinion, therefore, veterans are not primarily viewed as tough Rambo types or brave bringers of peace, but first and foremost as patients. The veteran is apparently today perceived as someone who is or can become a victim of his humanitarian efforts. For the Dutch government and for the armed forces, the media image of servicemen and women and veterans as victims with psychological difficulties has little appeal. After all, such a picture seriously undermines the authority and attraction of a military career. But an effective change of the existing picture might not be possible without participation in another good and just war. Apparently the image of veterans as heroes comes at a very high price indeed.

⁶ Jan Schoeman, 'Libanon in de lift', in: *Checkpoint. Maandblad voor veteranen* (november 2004) p 8-9.