

Dutch veterans feel misunderstood

May 18 2022



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Veterans experience social stereotyping and disinterest, concludes anthropologist Yvon de Reuver, who will receive a Ph.D. for her research from Radboud University on 23 May. Veterans are known to suffer from psychological problems they developed during their military service. But how do the veterans experience this themselves? De Reuver

examined what it means to them, being a veteran.

Military personnel who have been deployed in wars or peace missions are called "[veterans](#)," a title that acquires significance after the period of service. From that point on, they are often treated as a collective. For example, they are entitled to special care, [financial support](#) and other forms of help.

But in addition to this official status, former [military personnel](#) are also confronted with [social attitudes](#) towards veterans and the missions in which they served. They often feel misunderstood, according to Ph.D. research by anthropologist Yvon de Reuver, a researcher at the Netherlands Veterans Institute. For her Ph.D. at Radboud University, she interviewed nearly fifty veterans: former soldiers who served in Lebanon (1979–1985), Srebrenica (1994–1995) and Uruzgan (2006–2010).

Lack of understanding

Earlier research revealed that eighty percent of Dutch people say they appreciate veterans, but that only a third of veterans say they experience this appreciation. De Reuver investigated the causes of this inconsistency. Many interviewees remarked how little knowledge there is in society of what the armed forces do. "They are asked questions like: 'How many people did you kill?'" says De Reuver. "While some people even compare military missions to backpacking in Asia."

Many of the interviewed former soldiers are unhappy that the term veteran is associated with psychological suffering, the researcher continues. Yet they have that same association themselves. "I spoke to a very active Lebanon veteran, who even had created a mini Lebanon museum. But when I asked what being a veteran meant to him, he replied that he didn't feel like a veteran because he didn't have any [psychological problems](#)."

The study revealed more such contradictions. For example, veterans talk to each other a lot about the lack of understanding in society, but they are not inclined to talk about their war experiences with non-veterans, which therefore contributes to their ignorance.

"It is kind of a vicious circle," says De Reuver. "The feeling of being misunderstood reinforces the 'us and them' mentality among veterans. The interviewees also mentioned characteristics that they consider typical of veterans, such as being more focused on action and the collective, rather than on talking and the individual, like ordinary citizens."

Disillusioned helpers

Society's ideas about veterans are sometimes far removed from how veterans see themselves, according to De Reuver. "In recent years, Uruzgan veterans have often been presented in the media as disillusioned helpers, such as in the news reports when the Taliban took power in 2021. But I did not see that reflected in my conversations with veterans. They were more often proud of how well-trained they were and how well they had held their own. It was not about the higher goal of bringing democracy."

"I should add that the interviews took place between 2016 and 2018. It may be that they think differently now. But there seems to be little room in the public's perception of veterans for terms like masculinity. In this respect, we are not doing justice to the experiences of veterans and we are neglecting an important part of our history."

Dutch veteran policy was developed around the time when the psychological condition PTSS became known. According to De Reuver, that is why there is perhaps too much attention for the recognition and care of veterans who suffer from their war experience, while these are a

minority. "At the same time, the veteran status means a lot to war-damaged veterans, who of course deserve the best possible care. Ultimately, the most important thing is that all veterans can feel at home again in Dutch society. Veteran policy could focus more on this."

Provided by Radboud University

Citation: Dutch veterans feel misunderstood (2022, May 18) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2022-05-dutch-veterans-misunderstood.html>

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