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**FROM ISOLATION TO SOLIDARITY**

*You can close your eyes to reality, but not to memories.*

By Bart Hetebrij

**Introduction**

The purpose of this article is twofold. Firstly, I would like to present some insights into the problems facing some Dutchbat III servicemen following their return to the Netherlands from their mission, and in that connection, I would like to clarify the importance of pastoral care for that category. This I will do on the basis of a case taken from real life.

In the first half of 1995, the Dutchbat III battalion, consisting of 13 airmobile infantry battalion and a number of support units assumed over the peacekeeping task of protecting the Srebrenica enclave in eastern Bosnia. Almost at the end of their mission, they were confronted with a direct attack by Bosnian-Serb troops headed by General Mladic. The enclave had already been isolated from the outside world for some time, leading to a shortage of diesel, food, stores and not to be forgotten, mail. Incoming and outgoing transport was not possible. As a consequence, servicemen due leave were unable to depart and those who had departed on leave could not return to the enclave; amongst those was the author of this article.

As a result, the battalion was spread partly in the enclave, and partly elsewhere in Bosnia or in the Netherlands. The peacekeeping task proved to be an impossible mission, when the enclave was taken by the Bosnian Serbs in July 1995. More than 20,000 residents were deported, and the majority of the men were killed, out of the sight of the Dutchbat soldiers. A number of those men are still classified as missing. This was a black page in the history of UN peacekeeping missions, and a national trauma in the Netherlands.

The servicemen of Dutchbat III had long felt that they were required to implement an unworkable (impossible) UN mandate. Given the limited resources and the numbers of personnel, right from the start, they were unable to effectively protect the enclave against any external threat; equally, they were not in a position to disarm the Muslim militia, in order to prevent assaults outside the enclave. In addition, the enclave was isolated as a result of the presence of Bosnian Serb armed forces, with all the unavoidable consequences for leave, food supply, fuel and mail. This all resulted in primitive living conditions and minimal contact with the home front. Intimidation by the warring factions made the task of Dutchbat even more difficult. In the final phase of the deployment, a number of members of Dutchbat were taken hostage by the Bosnian Serbs in Bratunac, and faced the threat of execution. In the enclave itself, grenade attacks were commonplace, and Dutchbat came under direct fire. Two soldiers were killed in fighting, and four suffered severe injuries. Finally, the direct confrontation with the misery of the refugees, the separation of the men from the women and the subsequent deportation left deep impressions on the servicemen. They were confronted with indications of mass murder, and some were in fact eyewitnesses to murder.

All these points together influenced the way in which the Dutchbat servicemen dealt with their experiences following their return to the Netherlands. A considerable number of these servicemen demonstrated difficulties in adapting, and signs of stress. Commonly occurring complaints were irritability, increased wakefulness, sleeping problems, memory and concentration disorders, aggression and relationship problems. A number of factors such as the absence of support and recognition on the part of the employer and the political powers made it all the more difficult to deal with these complaints, or to admit that they were suffering. The Dutchbat servicemen had the feeling they had become the subject of political and military interests. It seemed as if all responsibility for the Srebrenica drama was being placed on the shoulders of the individual servicemen. This feeling was strengthened by accusations and insinuations in the media: Dutchbat was guilty or at least jointly responsible for the fall of the enclave, the subsequent mass murder and the deportation. As already stated, the battalion was reproached as having been cowardly, and having taken insufficient action. One consequence of this situation was the increased dysfunctioning of a number of servicemen, which took the form of conflicts in the workplace, high absenteeism levels, lack of motivation and cases of absence without leave. Another consequence of the negative publicity and the continued absence of recognition was that the servicemen were slower to approach help or care workers. Avoiding care was possibly further exacerbated by the culture within the Defence organisation. It was therefore no surprise that the signals that there was a problem were often issued by others sooner than by the servicemen themselves. These others were the partners of the servicemen, their colleagues or commanders. By this stage, the situation had often already gotten considerably out of hand: partners were on the point of ending relationships or commanders were considering putting the servicemen in question forward for dismissal. Situations of this kind started to occur between six months and one year following return, although there are examples whereby these situations arose sooner and later. It was in this period that I held interviews with several dozen servicemen.

Anton was one of those servicemen. I held a number of interviews with him in 1996. He was frequently ill at home, had conflicts in the workplace and as subsequently emerged, also in the home situation. I referred him to a Ministry of Defence psychologist. At the same time, I remained in contact with him: on the one hand to encourage him to start and to continue with the therapy, and on the other hand to break down the increased isolation that he was living in.

The interviews themselves served as a means of giving him insight into the relationship between his complaints and experiences during deployment, into himself and the importance of solidarity with others. To achieve these goals, I felt that the interviews should primarily be supportive in character. I wanted to give him some recognition for what he had experienced, and have him talk about those experiences. As time went by, I hoped that the problems he was facing, what he was loyal to, and who he really was would become clearer to him and I hoped that he would be able to express these issues in a process of self-articulation.

In addition, in close consultation with him, I attempted to draw out a number of themes from his story that it seemed important to discuss. My share in the story was not in bringing facts up, but his story did take various turns as a result of my questions, and by my pointing out meaningful themes. Amongst those important themes were solidarity, powerlessness and guilt.

These themes themselves were based on having experienced extreme violence. The resulting trauma had an influence on Anton's vision on humanity and his life convictions. In his case, this meant damage to his relationships with others, and increased isolation. According to Herman's *Trauma en herstel* (92-93), recovery of one's relationship with one's own social surroundings calls for recovery of a vision on a life in which solidarity once again has a place. For that reason, I focused on Anton's philosophical vision, in as much as any

such vision was explicitly present, and otherwise, wherever it emerged from what he told me of his experiences. As a result, I had an opportunity, also based on my own vision on life, to discuss themes that emerged in these interviews. In part I thereby confirmed Anton's vision, and in part invited him in this way to reflect on his own experiences and attitudes. This could be described as the dialogical aspect of the interview, because as time went by, there was a clear mutual exchange of opinions and ideas. Alongside self-articulation and interpretative thematisation, the dialogical component is the third element in my working method as a counsellor.

### **The case**

At the moment I came into contact with him, Corporal Anton had been back from deployment for almost nine months. He had a fixed-term contract with the Defence organisation. This contract was due to expire in one year's time. Over the past six months, Anton had been frequently ill for short periods of time. On some occasions he reported properly that he would be remaining at home, and on others he failed to report at all. He gave his colleagues the impression that he was experiencing motivational problems. Anton was not open towards his colleagues or his commander. Any communication was superficial, and he showed nothing of his true self. As a consequence, his commander was unable to assess Anton's problems, but suspected there was probably more going on. Because the commander was required to issue a recommendation on possible extension of the contract in a few months time, he asked me to contact Anton, and to find out exactly what was going on. It is not usual for contacts with clients to be made in this manner. Generally speaking, interviews take place at the client's own initiative.<sup>1</sup>

I knew Anton from the deployment. He was aware of the nature of pastoral care. When he visited me, I explained to him he was here because the commander was unable to identify the reason for the repeated absences due to sickness of Anton, on the basis of the commander's knowledge of Anton. I agreed with Anton that I would only inform the commander of anything discussed, if Anton gave me permission to do so. Following this introduction, I asked if he was experiencing any problems. He subsequently talked to me about the difficulties he was experiencing.

His greatest problem was the inability to sleep. For months he had been waking up every night, from his dreams. He was then unable to get back to sleep. This was also the reason for his frequent absences. In addition, since his return from his deployment, those around him had said he had been behaving increasingly aggressively. He himself had also felt this aggression. Partly as a result of this behaviour, his girlfriend was threatening to end a six-year relationship. He was unable to discuss the relationship problems with his girlfriend that had arisen. He also explained that from time to time he was very irritable, interspersed with bouts of crying. In addition, he was often tired, was suffering from forgetfulness in combination with concentration difficulties, and he felt himself emotionally flat.

He had suffered these symptoms since shortly after his deployment. He had started dreaming about the positive aspects of the deployment, which had slowly altered to dreams about more negative issues. This had gradually developed into the complaints described. For a number of reasons, for a long period he had tried to suppress these complaints. For example he did not wish to burden others with his problems. And his complaints did not tie in with his own self-image. Within the culture of elite units like the airmobile brigade, control and (self) control are typical buzzwords. He also feared a lack of understanding from 'new' colleagues

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1 The request from the commander to contact Anton was based on concern. In connection with the immunity and privacy situation, I made it clear to the commander that I would only report back to him those facts for which I had permission from the client.

who had not experienced the deployment. Such fears are indeed not entirely misplaced. The battalion was not only accused of cowardice in the media. On numerous occasions, servicemen from other units had referred to *vluchtbat* ('flight battalion') or 'runbat', rather than Dutchbat.

Initially, Anton did not himself believe that the deployment had changed him, except in the sense he had become tougher. He thought he had the situation under control, but his mother, girlfriend and friends thought he had changed. The transition from deployment to the home situation had taken place too quickly. At home, Anton responded as he had done in the deployment area: distanced and tough. A holiday with his girlfriend in Italy immediately following the deployment was not a success. He could not talk to her about his experiences, and the people he needed, his buddies, were not around. He felt that following the return from the deployment, the unit had been disbanded far too quickly. He missed the positive aspects, such as camaraderie and the sense of belonging. This was making him increasingly aggressive. He was not able to make the transition.

## Experiences during deployment

In *Trauma & Transformation* (16-19), Tedeschi and Calhoun wonder what causes events to be experienced as traumatic. It emerges that above all the circumstances in which those particular events took place are important. They describe a number of characteristics. The events take place suddenly and unexpectedly; there is no control over the situation; they are unusual or abnormal situations; the occurrence contributes to the long-term nature of the problems experienced; there is a sense of guilt. If we look more deeply into the experiences of Anton during his deployment, we see that all of these characteristics recur in his story.

Halfway through the deployment, a friend of Anton who was situated outside the enclave with Alpha Company in Simin Han was killed. At that time, Anton was with another section, inside the enclave. The two had become friends during their training for the airmobile brigade. Anton had little time to think about his loss. Within one hour of hearing the news, he had to go back out on patrol. He was unable to find closure for himself about this loss. There was no ceremony, nor much opportunity to discuss the event with others.

A few months later, a short time before the deployment ended, Anton was placed in a unit tasked with delaying the Bosnian-Serb offensive, by taking up so-called 'blocking positions'. As a consequence, Dutchbat's mission changed colour. It was no longer a blue 'peacekeeping' task, but had become a green 'peace enforcement' operation. If necessary, the Bosnian-Serbs had to be stopped by force. The servicemen selected for taking up these positions did not expect to get out of the situation alive. Some of them wrote their goodbye letters. Over a two-day period, the firing was so closely targeted and heavy that no one slept a wink. In his armoured vehicle, Anton felt afraid and enclosed. He was not the only one. This fear of death was a topic of discussion among those present.

At a certain point, the orders came from above to relinquish the 'blocking positions'. The strength and firepower of the opponent were too great. The armoured vehicle crew obeyed the orders to withdraw, and joined the flood of refugees heading for the headquarters base of Dutchbat. Anton saw elderly people lying by the side of the road, exhausted and helpless. 'They are not going to make it', was his thought. People placed their children on the armoured vehicle, and he was then required to push or lower the children back off the armoured vehicle, all the time watched by the refugees who looked at him with hope and expectation. This went completely against his convictions. He had never felt so powerless.

On his return to main base, Anton was given new tasks. He was to accompany convoys of women and children who were being deported by the Bosnian Serbs. En route, he came across

refugees sitting and lying at the side of the road, covered in blood. He also saw clothing piled up at the side of the road.

He approached the football stadium that would receive so much media attention at a later date. He saw thousands of men kneeling on the ground, guarded by Serb militiamen dressed in black. The men were searched and ordered to leave behind all their clothes, except their underpants.

Anton and his driver also came under direct threat. During a second convoy supervision trip, Bosnian Serbs took control of Anton's armoured vehicle. Attempts were also made to remove his other property. Despite considerable personal risk, he refused to hand over these items. For two days, he and the driver were trapped on the frontline, without a vehicle to return to base. During those two days he observed how prisoners were beaten by the Bosnian Serbs, in improvised prisons. When he eventually returned to base, the refugees had already been taken away. Only the wounded were left behind. All that remained of the mass of humanity was the tremendous smell. Later in our interviews, Anton talked of one experience he had not been able to discuss initially: he had been the direct witness of an execution of a Bosnian by Serb servicemen or paramilitaries.

Having listened to Anton's tale, I first gave him information. I explained to him that there could be a relationship between the problems he was experiencing and certain experiences during his deployment. I also told him about post-traumatic stress syndrome (PTSS), and the accompanying symptoms. At first glance, he appeared to fulfil the criteria for a PTSS diagnosis<sup>2</sup>. In consultation with him, I therefore referred him to a Ministry of Defence psychologist<sup>3</sup> for diagnosis and possibly treatment. Following this referral, we agreed that Anton would also hold a number of interviews with me. He said he would appreciate this. He was able to talk very openly to me about a number of issues relating to the deployment, since I myself had participated in that same deployment. There was no need for him to explain anything about the context of the deployment, which facilitated both contact and the interviews themselves. On the other hand, I felt it was part of my task to continue to support him, and to monitor the situation, now that he was experiencing such difficulties.

After eight sessions, the intake with the psychologist was still not complete. On the other hand, in the discussions with both myself and with the psychologist, it had become clear to Anton that there is indeed a link between his experiences during deployment and his complaints.

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<sup>2</sup> The characteristics of PTSS are: 1) Re-living: painful memories impose themselves (dreams). 2) Sensory limitations: avoidance behaviour, loss of interest, detachment, emotional flatness. 3) Increased alertness/irritability: difficulty in falling asleep and sleeping through, irritation, sudden rages, concentration difficulties. American Psychiatric Association (APA, 1995) in the reader by K. Meijer *Posttraumatisch stressyndroom* 1996 pp. 8-9.

<sup>3</sup> Servicemen can contact a Ministry of Defence psychologist directly. However, this is generally brought about through the intervention of a military physician, defence social services or pastoral carer. These referrals are made in writing on forms specially developed by Ministry of Defence psychologists for that purpose.

## DISCUSSION THEMES

### Powerlessness.

With this picture of Anton, I began follow-up interviews with him. Powerlessness was for him the most far-reaching experience. Feeling powerlessness because he was unable to do anything about the situation facing the local population. “We should never have let the refugees leave the base” and “We should have shown a more solid response to the Bosnian Serbs”, were statements that expressed his feeling of powerlessness. The fact that he had been unable to do anything about the situation of the beaten prisoners in the improvised prison when he was on the frontline; the fact that he had had to push children from the armoured vehicle whom parents had passed to him full of desperation and expectation: these issues made him powerless.

He could no longer understand the world: “Was there no one who could have intervened? Surely something or someone could have stopped this. Where was the UN? Who will come and help us? Are we alone in this? Surely this can’t be happening? Is that what justice is all about?” He felt lost. I asked him whether he had been able to talk with colleagues about this or whether they had been able to support one another. Anton indicated that there had effectively been no time to talk about these issues. The situation was chaotic, no one had a clear overview and the sometimes-contradictory orders were coming in thick and fast. Anton then had the sense of having lost control of the situation. Looking back, he said, “I still do not understand how it could have happened, let alone be able to explain it to others”. I told him that I could imagine he could no longer understand it, but that he could talk about it. And that talking about it could lead to a better understanding of the situation and the realisation that the injustice he had experienced was apparently also part of the human experience.

Anton then replied, “So can you understand why Bert was killed? Surely he was here to help the people who killed him. Do you understand that then?”

I asked what it all meant to him, the loss of his friend and colleague Bert, his own fear of death, the situation of the beaten prisoners, the expectant and desperate looks of parents who wanted to give him their children. “It made me completely powerless”, said Anton. “The same sort of powerlessness I recognise from earlier when my parents divorced.” “Do you understand that experience”, I asked? “Yes, looking back I do understand it”, said Anton, “but I do not want to feel the experience.” I replied that ‘feeling’ is perhaps the precursor of ‘understanding’. In both cases, the divorce and the deployment, the question emerged in his mind who he really was, and what he stood for or wanted to stand for.

I told him that I had noticed that in situations that are out of control, he shut himself off to his emotions. However, as a result, he denied and suppressed elements of who he was, and then responded by expressing feelings of rage and guilt. The result was alienation from himself and from his environment.

His girlfriend found it difficult to cope with his bursts of anger. Contacts with his mother were also far from smooth. He mistrusted his new colleagues and suspected them of talking about him behind his back. He could not tell his story to anyone. Tedeschi and Calhoun (23) identified this as one of the negative changes in the behaviour of traumatised individuals. These individuals do not believe that others can understand them, let alone help them. As a result, the person experiencing the crisis isolates himself from others.

Cautiously I suggested to him that I had the sense he had lost himself, or at least the carefully built self-image of a person who had to keep everything under control, and I said to him that it seemed to me that in such a situation, it must be very difficult to share your feelings with others. I also asked him, given his young age, whether he felt that it was in any way possible for him to allow powerlessness into his life. I commented that he upheld a life vision in which he focused primarily on power and control. A life orientation of that kind may fit in with his profession, but I told him that focusing on power is too restrictive, because where there is power, there is also a downside, namely the possibility of powerlessness. Because Anton had decided in the past to ban powerlessness from his life, he was now lacking the behavioural repertoire to deal with the situation. The result was alienation.

Anton indeed seemed to understand that the downside of power was powerlessness, and that a life vision calls for a focus on both sides of the coin. He indicated that powerlessness made him very vulnerable, was so painful and caused such grief. I told him that it was at least *his* pain and grief. I told him that if he were to not admit those emotions, he would be cutting away part of himself. Cutting away and amputating parts of your existence leads to alienation. I told him that however painful they were, he had no choice but to admit those emotions, because they were part of his existence. They say something about who you are, what you find important and what is valuable to you as an individual. They enable you to get to know yourself and that enables you to grow. I told him that even though something itself may be very negative, it is still a part of his overall story. A chapter in that story may be meaningful. I told him that he had control over the story because he was the author. It was up to him to nonetheless give meaning to something negative. Pain and sorrow can be extremely valuable learning experiences. They force you to return to yourself and think about and discover what really matters in your life. They enable you to experience with greater awareness, to feel with greater depth and to make better choices.

Based on my own life philosophy, I suggested to him that in hindsight, he could deal with these experiences in such a way that powerlessness could be viewed as a given fact of life, and thereby accepted, and that his experiences could then serve as a stepping stone to building a new positive life, and a vision on how people should interact with one another. Anton suggested that he could not (yet) accept the experience of powerlessness as a given element in his life, let alone have his experiences serve as a stepping stone to a positive life. He still believed that he had fallen well short of what was required of him, and he felt guilty about that shortcoming: as a servicemen and also as a human being, he had not taken his personal responsibility. I suggested that there certainly was a possible relationship between his experiences of powerlessness, his sense of guilt (via the feeling of having fallen short) and the allocation of responsibility. Nonetheless, however, he still had to make a start on accepting his experiences of powerlessness, because continuing in the current situation was not an option for him. He also fully realised that family ties and the relationship with his girlfriend were important to him, but in some way or other, he felt it was difficult to maintain contact with them, and to truly reach them. Anton said, "It is as if I am up to my middle in a bog, and am unable to escape, and that no one is responding to my cries for help". I told him that the link between our two visions on life is that contact with others is extremely important, and that there are moments when you may be in desperate need of others, but that in order to meet that need, you must allow others into your life. I told him that as a son, partner and colleague he had a right to solidarity, but that that right also entailed obligations, such as allowing someone into your life, however difficult it is. We agreed that contacts are important, but there were still differences on how those contacts should be achieved. Anton drew what he needed from his contacts, but was unable to give much back, which placed him in a situation of isolation.

## Solidarity.

I told Anton that I was worried not only about his continued complaints, but also his increased isolation. In *Trauma en herstel* (Trauma and Recovery), J.L. Herman (75) describes how traumatic events damage fundamental human relationships, and also cause damage to the structure of the self as it is formed and maintained in relationships with others. This damage in the field of relationships, according to Herman, is not a derived effect of the trauma, but is specifically a direct effect of traumatic events. Trauma not only means damage to the psychological structures of the self, but also to the systems of attachment and meaning which form the link between individuals (and society). Herman (255) describes helplessness and isolation as key experiences following a psychological trauma. A renewed sense of power and solidarity is the core experience for recovery. I wanted to work towards these effects with Anton. A recovery of his links with his social environment calls for the recovery of a vision on life in which solidarity once again has a place. A vision with more balance between giving and taking, because I noted that he takes more than he gives in relationships, which can also turn people away.

I told him that solidarity – the meeting – is a central feature in my life philosophy. Only in solidarity with others can self-realisation, self-expression and self-determination take place. In my view, how you experience, see and describe yourself is the result of relationships with others. Put another way: by expressing myself, I realise and define myself. In that process of self-articulation, significant others also have a role to play. My point of departure is therefore that the creation and maintenance of our identity is a dialogical process. Our identity needs recognition provided by significant others. For Anton, in addition to his girlfriend and family, those significant others are the colleagues whom he was deployed with; that is, after all, the group that he feels solidarity with. I noted that in Anton's philosophy of life, solidarity occupies an important place, but that in his direct relationships, this theme is under considerable pressure.

Although Anton has entered a new relationship, little has been discussed about who he really is, how he sees himself and his experiences. He indicated to me that unlike in his previous relationship, his new partner showed interest in his work as a servicemen and was interested in the fact that he was deployed. Anton said that he found it difficult to express these matters, however. He did not know where to start. I suggested simply making a start with the issue by talking to me, and dedicating a number of interviews to those questions. I suggested that with me as a relative stranger, it may be safer, so that Anton need feel less susceptible in terms of his self-image, than in his newly established relationship. I explained to him that his capacity to give meaning to his experiences seemed to have been undermined by the traumatic events he witnessed. I subsequently suggested to him that this incapacity certainly does not contribute to good feelings about himself. I told him that in order to recover a positive self-image, he would need new self-respect, alongside a renewed sense of autonomy, in solidarity with others. Renewed self-respect can only be achieved in solidarity with others: others who recognise in discussions with him that the events he experienced were traumatic, who can suspend passing judgement, and who are willing to simply listen to what he has to say.

I also encouraged him to truly show interest in others because I believe that mutuality is the basis for every relationship. I noted that up to that point he had told little about who his girlfriend really was, how he viewed the relationship, what he expected from it, and how he wanted to be supported by her, and how he could support her. I told Anton that being in a relationship with him would not be easy for her. He admitted this fact. The reason he gave for this was that he did not have a good sense of himself, and as a consequence, often responded to her irritably. I suggested to him that it was good that he realised the impression he left on her, and the causes thereof. Subsequently I asked whether he wished to change in that respect,



and how he should do so. He indicated that the time was ripe to look critically at himself, and to give a realistic judgement of himself, in order to subsequently allow these issues to be discussed with her and the family.

Anton started by stating that he clearly expected himself to be able to face up to any situations and challenges facing him. In his own mind, he had not lived up to that self-image. I asked him whether he felt that people should be able to face up to any situation. I told him that after all people do not have to be able to do everything. The circumstances can be against you, or people may suffer a moment of weakness. Anton said that this was the case, but that servicemen should be prepared for anything, and should be able to deal with unforeseen circumstances. I noted that his picture of humanity fitted almost seamlessly with his military self-image. I cautiously suggested that failure, making mistakes and weaknesses in fact are part of being human and are important for the learning process. Later in the interview, Anton admitted that there are sometimes circumstances which you cannot control. I referred to his experiences during his deployment.

After a number of interviews, I was able to advance so far that he was willing to share his experiences with his meaningful others. At this time, it finally became clear to his close family and his girlfriend that Anton's behaviour and his problems must be related to the terrible experiences in the deployment area. Within this close group of people, understanding was created for Anton. In particular his relationship with his mother improved. The past was also talked about. How she had experienced the divorce, her inability to offer the family warmth and safety. The pain and the sorrow that resulted. As a consequence, Anton acquired a different view of this situation, and of his mother. Very cautiously, a tie started to develop between him and his mother. When Anton discussed his deployment experiences with his close family and his girlfriend, as well as his problems and his attitude to life, he suggested that he started to experience more inner peace. The sleeping problems, the fatigue, the concentration difficulties and the forgetfulness were still constantly present, but he felt a reduction in aggression levels, and less bouts of crying, and less dreams. Because it seemed that he was achieving greater stability in himself and in his relationships with meaningful others, I attempted cautiously to deal with the experiences he had not yet told me about. Experiences which in his own words he had undergone alone, and about which he had been practically unable to talk to anyone.

## Guilt.

Anton told me that starting right after his return from deployment, he had suffered from a constantly recurring dream. Every night, he would wake up bathed in sweat, from the same dream. In that dream, he always saw the same face with the same expression and look in the eyes. It was not an unknown face. It was not fiction, but an enlarged detail from a real life drama, so shocking that it woke him up every night, after which he could not get back to sleep again.

The incident took place during the second convoy supervision of refugees in buses, before the Bosnian Serbs took control of their vehicle. Anton was co-driver, and was seated next to the driver. They came close to the infamous football stadium, and were only able to drive slowly because the road was packed with men who had been seized, and their guards. As they drove past the stadium at walking pace, they saw thousands of men, placed together in groups of 10 to 12 men, whilst their clothes and possessions were removed from them. They were only allowed to keep on their underpants. Along the side of the road, were huge piles of various possessions and clothing. These men were subsequently taken into the stadium, and

forced to kneel in rows of four. Anton had a very bad premonition about what was going to happen with these men.

He turned his face away from the stadium, and looked the other way. There he saw two Serbs dressed in black smiling and waving to him, from some distance. Slowly they moved towards him. He saw that they were supporting a man between them. A man who appeared to be wearing a red track suit. When they came closer, he saw that the man was only wearing underpants, and that his entire body was covered in blood.

The man looked at him and called for help. The expression on the man's face was that of somebody who knew he was going to die. Anton slowly drove past this scene. When he looked in the rear view mirror, he saw that one of the Serbs had placed his gun against the head of the man, and pulled the trigger. The man collapsed. Anton asked the driver whether he had also seen the incident, but he denied having done so. The driver had either really not seen it or had not wanted to see it. At that moment, Anton felt tremendous rage. This feeling was subsequently joined by powerlessness and a feeling of guilt. Anton said he would never forget the expression on the man's face. How could he; it was after all precisely that facial expression that appeared to him every night in his dream, and subsequently kept him awake.

Anton often thought, "What would have happened if we had stopped?" Anton continued, "perhaps the Serbs had said to their prisoner, if that UN car stops for you, then they obviously think you are worth keeping alive, and so will leave you alive, if not, in their opinion you are not worth anything, let alone in our opinion, and then we'll shoot you dead". These are the sort of thoughts that constantly go through Anton's mind every night, when he wakes up from his nightmare and get not get back to sleep. Because Anton found it extremely difficult to tell this story to his family and girlfriend, I asked him to first put it down on paper, and let them read it, when he was ready. He had told the story on one previous occasion, during the operational debriefing following his return. His interviewers had not been either truly involved or interested. They simply wanted to know the map coordinates of the incident, and advised him subsequently to not talk about the incident with anyone.

Anton's isolation was not only caused by the horrific pictures from the constantly recurring dream, but also by his idea that no one could understand his confrontation with the incident. The lack of understanding was above all due to the feelings of shame and guilt which the incident had generated in Anton, and still continued to generate. I told him that he needed help from others to overcome these feelings, in order to be able to arrive at a fair judgement of his own behaviour. I explained to him that a realistic judgement could reduce the sense of guilt. Hard criticism, lack of interest or denial, on the other hand, would make him reproach himself all the more, and become even more isolated. A realistic judgement of his behaviour would contribute to an honest attribution of responsibility whether taken or not. These are all issues necessary in order to arrive at renewed self-respect. Anton said this was difficult. "I felt tremendously involved with the refugees. I wanted to help them. They called upon my assistance, but I could do nothing and wasn't allowed to do anything. It breaks you up. In military service, you learn to disregard yourself on behalf of the group. Here I was forced to walk out on the 'group'. That contradicts totally who I am. It gives me a bad feeling. I cannot account for myself. I have a sense that I failed". I told him he deserved more respect than he was willing to give himself. At the end of the day, he had shown involvement with those who needed help, in a confusing and chaotic situation. Because of the circumstances, he was unable to offer that help, but that did not make him an incompetent person.

Together with Anton, I worked through the various scenarios of the incident: What would have happened if he had stopped, and what they perhaps could have done. We together reached the conclusion that the result would most probably have been the same, but that the sense of powerlessness would have perhaps been even greater. The only advantage would have been that Anton could have shared the experience with the driver. The fact that he was

unable to share the experience was extremely burdensome for Anton. The inability to share contains a form of denial, not only of the occurrence itself, but also of who you are. After a number of interviews, he was able to write down this bizarre experience on paper. Only by putting it down on paper, and talking to me about it, he obtained the feeling, “yes, I truly did experience this”. Anton found it difficult to honestly judge his own behaviour and to find a balance between his (unrealistic) feelings of guilt and the rejection of all moral responsibility. I told him that we should take into account the awful circumstances of the occurrences, and how a normal person would have responded. This was a case of a moral dilemma in a situation in which there was extremely little freedom of choice. The fact that choice was limited does not make such considerations unnecessary, because I recognised that the moral feelings of guilt and shame in Anton could not be eradicated by the limited moral choices under those circumstances. It was not sufficient to simply release Anton from all responsibility; that would have been selling him short.

Together with Anton, I wished to arrive at a realistic judgement of his behaviour, and as I previously stated, a fair allocation of responsibility. I wished to gain a detailed insight into the specific reasons as to why Anton blamed himself, with a view to initiating the processing of the event.

Thanks to the process of reconstruction, Anton was able to clarify the situation and his own role in it, and give it meaning. He accepted the fact that he could not have behaved differently. He said, “I now have the sense that I can account for myself and justify the fact that I acted as I did in that situation. That does of course not mean that I can justify the events and the actions of others. The drama remains as it were imprinted on my mind.”

He subsequently showed what he had written on paper to his girlfriend and to his close family. They responded with understanding, which he experienced as recognition of the difficult situation in which he found himself. Anton has now reached the stage that he is willing to enter into a closer relationship with others. There is once again solidarity with others. Allowing others to share the traumatic experience is a precondition for once again being able to see the world as a meaningful place, since traumas undermine interpretation systems.

Now that Anton is once again in a position to enter into meaningful dialogical relationships with persons important to him, I note that changes in Anton’s self-image can slowly be observed. For example, he no longer considers it so important that his contract with the Defence organisation is not to be extended. The picture of the tough macho has outlived its shelf life. The self-image of control, management and the suppression of feelings no longer fits him, now that he is able to admit his feelings, and talk about them with others. He realises that however awful the experiences were, in the end they have brought him closer to himself and to what is truly of value for him. In this way, he is able to retain a degree of self-respect and personal value by experiencing that he has a boundary which cannot be crossed. After all, he consistently refused, even under threat of force, to hand over to the Bosnian Serbs and the Serbs his personal equipment. By refusing, he ran considerable personal risks. In this way, despite all the powerlessness he experienced, Anton maintained and experienced a certain degree of autonomy. Autonomy assumes freedom of choice. When he decided not to hand over any of his personal possessions, he stuck to that choice and felt responsible for it. Looking back, Anton said, “The fact that I made that choice under those circumstances, and did not deviate from it subsequently makes me feel bloody good.”

## Finally

When I approached Anton more than a year ago for an interview, I saw someone who was surviving. The solidarity with people whom he loved was under considerable pressure. Far-reaching experiences from his deployment were suppressed, and the accompanying emotions not admitted. Instead, other emotions had emerged in the form of a range of problems which he himself could no longer relate to his specific experiences during deployment. He was tired, could barely sleep, was very forgetful, was unconcentrated and was suffering from terrible bouts of rage. These moments of rage were forcing him increasingly into social isolation, both at work and in his home situation. My first concern was to keep communication with him open. Offering security and proximity were my tools.

Subsequently, we investigated together whether there could be a relationship between his problems and his experiences during deployment. Because the symptoms presented by Anton fulfilled the diagnostic criteria for possibly being a sufferer of PTSS (according to DSM IV), I referred him to a Ministry of Defence psychologist. Initially this was not a success, because Anton was unable to stick to the agreements made, as a result of which the intake was halted.

My second concern was his increasing social isolation. The establishment of meaningful, dialogical relationships with meaningful others was under considerable pressure. Anton's life story took on a static character. His established self-image had not proven adequate in his orientation towards and evaluation of the dramatic events he experienced. That self-image was the result of a previous breaking moment experienced in Anton's life, namely his parents' divorce. The refusal to admit emotions and focusing on control and management may well have proved effective as a strategy in the past, but now it was time for a new form of self-articulation.

The events in Srebrenica had as it were elicited a new breaking-point experience. Continuity of and solidarity in experiences had once again been interrupted, for Anton. The experience of total powerlessness gave him the feeling of having fallen short in taking his responsibility as a serviceman and as a human being, which in turn elicited from him tremendous feelings of guilt. Who was he really? The tough macho, the exemplary serviceman or the tough guy who hid away his feelings? And what did he really stand for? Helping people in need, or merely thinking of himself? These were the questions we discussed during our interviews. Together, we went in search of a self-definition which left space for openness and involvement in relationships with others, and which in a broader sense made it possible to enter into a relationship with the world, based on trust. In these interviews, I attempted to show that his self-image, however useful it may have been in the past, had become a restrictive straightjacket. I also expressed my admiration and respect for how he stuck to what was truly of value for him, and how he had discovered his own boundaries, despite the risk to his life.

By encouraging Anton (time and again) to tell his story, talk about his experiences and the accompanying emotions, by identifying themes in the content of his story, and by responding from within my own vision on life, possibilities were once again created for personal growth, and he was eventually able to establish links with others. Only in that solidarity with others was he able to arrive at a renewed self-articulation. That self-articulation still needs to mature, but it helped him realise that the role of serviceman did not really suit him, whilst it also encouraged him to seek further psychological help, and gave him an insight into how important others were for him. In summarising, we could conclude that the first step involved giving meaning to the trauma and accepting what it did to his identity, whereby identity should be taken to mean the result of the existence lived to date and as the starting point for thinking, feeling and acting; the subsequent, second step then involved arriving at possibilities for self-understanding, and on that basis, achieving personal growth.

Although first welcomed as heroes, Anton and many of his colleagues found themselves facing their first critics soon after their return. In a previously unheard-of media offensive, the members of the Dutchbat battalion were held jointly responsible for the genocide. The men were accused of cowardice. Neither the political powers nor the military leaders did much to turn this tide. The blame for the failing UN response was placed entirely unilaterally on the shoulders of individual Dutchbat servicemen. For a number of those Dutchbat battalion members, the shifting of responsibility and the unfair criticism deepened the trauma they had already experienced, and delayed their turning to care providers. The intention of this article is to outline what this meant for Anton. Politicians, journalists and many others have long closed their eyes to reality; Anton and the other Dutchbat servicemen are still stuck with the memories. Closing your eyes to memories does not help.

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## Moral Counselling During a Mission

### **A report of an attempt to give shape and content to moral counselling during a mission in former Yugoslavia.**

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Every counsellor on home base, during exercises and on missions is regularly confronted with the question "What does a counsellor exactly do?" Sometimes there is confusion around the notion of 'counsellor' and we are mistaken for a social or legal counsellor. When it is explained that you are a humanistic moral counsellor in the worst case people think you are a humanitarian staff-member, in the best you are invited to talk about humanism. And when consequently you give an exposition of the important themes and starting points of humanist thought, it is very likely to get a response such as "Oh, but that makes me a humanist then as well!" On its own account this response is quite positive, but for the sake of the clarity of the profession it is necessary we call for a clear profile, especially when the request for service is biggest: during missions.

### **Profiling**

The question is how to give shape and content to your philosophical identity within the military system whilst being on a mission. This is important for two reasons: firstly, because cooperation with adjacent professions is even closer during missions than on the home base. I don't just think of first order professionals of other denominations, such as the pastor or the reverend, but also of social workers and psychologists, who belong to the second order. It is crucial to make arrangements with all parties on how to cooperate. And the more closely people cooperate, the more professional clarity is desired, especially when neighbouring disciplines start moving on your domain.

Secondly, I think the target group has the right to know exactly what they can expect from you as a moral counsellor. During information meetings one could go into the content of the job and say "We want to give a start to the locating of 'existential' experiences in a context of meaning", but with respect to the profession, I think these descriptions of the nature of the profession to many is rather abstract. The average soldier has a practical view and is concerned with results. It is a better thing to say you support soldiers in questions such as "Who am I as a human being?", "What is the meaning of my life?" and "What is it I finally want in life?" Questions like these may become very important on missions, because for a certain stretch of time soldiers are taken out of their familiar social context and they, or the home front, make up the balance (sometimes with far reaching consequences, such as divorce). Because of this special situation, being at war or something comparable, and the fact that the soldier is cut off from family, friends, acquaintances and possible religious institutions, for me as a moral counsellor it is all the more important to look at the quality of the content and to see if the approach is appealing to the soldier. In cases like these it is more vital to do your job as a moral counsellor well, because of the falling away of the emotional, moral and religious support of the home front. It invites the moral counsellor to a continuous process of critical self-reflection on the content and shape of the profession.

In this article I will go into this process with the aim of providing clarity in this domain, not only for the sake of the target group, but also the neighbouring disciplines. By showing how humanistic starting points influence the choice of themes (content) and the dealing with problems (shape), I will indicate what humanistic moral counselling is.

## The quest for identity

In the beginning I had the impression that I couldn't make the identity of the profession clear enough to others. Starting the first week of the mission I held contemplative services, which I stopped doing quickly. There were hardly any participants and preparation took a long time; at a certain point I felt more like a kind of surrogate preacher. It was quite clear I wasn't myself, in this sort of service I couldn't express my philosophical identity.

The reverent and pastor were hoping to see my contemplative moments to circulate in their schedule of services. Initially I was planning to, but besides the low outcome the shape started to annoy me: too little dialogue, too much a service. Besides that I have to be able to direct the content at the actuality of the events at the base under question. Then I will miss the connection with people from other bases to tell a caring story. More or less I have been able to suck up the material from the people, from the public sphere of which I very clearly make part. A general story isn't my cup of tea, unless it is a special occasion, such as Christmas or New Year.

This all means one should again look critically at the philosophical starting points and how to translate these into the practice of counselling. Before I go into these starting points, let me first turn to my worldview and vision of humanity.

To me as a humanist a worldview isn't a cookery book full of ready-made recipes (dogmas). It is more an attitude of life with a lot of space for critical self-reflection, dialogue and the readiness to adjust starting points, in which recognition of one's own uncertainty is the beginning. It is an attitude which doesn't presuppose a final reality behind nature; we live in the here and now, and all of us have to deal with that, each in his or her own way. I don't believe in eternal truths or higher guide to meaning or a meaning within the universe. Thus, we will have to give meaning to existence ourselves. This is a tough but challenging assignment. To me, humankind isn't the jewel of creation, but more a contingent side product of a certain causal track. In that sense we are all equal and we can't claim a special position in the face of each other and other species.

Important philosophical themes to me are: firstly, *self-responsibility*, the fundamental awareness that people have to lead their own life, and because of their human possibilities also carry responsibility for that life. Besides that, we are not isolated human beings, but are always in interaction and connection with other people; recognition of this creates moral duties. Secondly, *living consciously*, that is, the possibility to reflect on personal or general circumstances and when possible make adjustments in those circumstances. Thirdly, *self-knowledge* (as a critical condition for living consciously), obtaining insights into your situation, possibilities, values and aims, in order to act in accordance with the person you've become. Fourthly, *values*: people have the possibility of setting out norms and values and pursuing them constructively. Many values can't be realised, at most we can create conditions to bring them closer. It is about reflection on what you want and why. Fifthly, we have *aims*: reflection on personal aims, what is worthy to strive for and why? Finally, there are *choices*, life is about making choices, how do we choose from the abundance of options and why do we make certain choices.

From this philosophical backdrop I will try to fill in the picture for counselling. The Dutch Humanist Union has given me directions, which I have to follow: to contribute to the humanisation of the Army. On the one hand this humanisation performed by supporting individuals within the army in giving meaning to life, on the other hand by the realisation, maintaining or increasing of human values, I refer to values on the level of human integrity, self-determination, co-decision making, self-expression, self-realisation, striving towards self-direction. These all are values that are oppressed within the hierarchical structure of commands.

To meet these aims the service for humanistic moral counselling has a number of tools at its disposal. The most important ones are individual meetings, group discussions and structural meetings with fellow counsellors and commanders. In short, assigned by the organisation sending me into this position, I try to design a practice of moral counselling based upon philosophical starting points by using the tools at hand.

### **If no weekly services, what then?**

When soldiers are sent out on a mission for a certain stretch of time, this means they are taken out of their existential context of work and relationships. This might create a need, and sometimes even a necessity, of contemplating that existential context of the home front or the area of the mission, maybe done either through talking to a moral counsellor or by entering a group meeting (ordered by organisational characteristics or themes). This forces me to maintain intensive contact with individual soldiers. Themes that characterise the meetings do not only come forth from my humanistic philosophy, but are also raised by the actual situation of their personal circumstances and the general circumstances of the area of the mission.

I have now in mind the *reflection* on their designing of their own life. The situation of being on a mission sometimes leads to important *choices* in the field of work and relations. Do I want to stay with my partner?, do I still want to be a soldier? It's about the so-called slow questions. What do I want in life, what to me is of actual *value*? Do, for instance, the experiences of violent conflicts and situations in which one is powerless change that which is valued? Can you remain faithful to your norms and values when you experience injustice, when the cadre or group put pressure on you? What are my personal *aims*? Do these change during a mission, and what does that mean to me? Another theme is concerned with taking *responsibility* for one's own destiny. How do I, as a soldier, deal with downtime, ignorance and opportunism? On mission conferences a lot of young soldiers indicate that gaining *self-knowledge* is an important reason to go on a mission, besides obtaining experience and cash. With self-knowledge they then mean getting insight into their circumstances, possibilities, values, aims and their own characters with their strengths and weaknesses.

Mentioned themes more or less become the keynotes of the dialogues with the individual soldier. I have noticed that a lot of questions and difficulties in life are connected with being a soldier. An increasing number of soldiers, especially those who are there on a limited time scale, have to deal with divorced parents, poor education and sometimes an alien background. They are people with a fractured life-story. This background for instance influences the idea of self-appreciation, the capability of interpreting their actions in relation to the future, experiences some grip on life, the evaluating of their actions in terms of values (is what I do or omit to do all right, desirable or acceptable?)

When you relate this fact to the situation of a mission and the involved quality of managing, mutual personal relations, the experienced usefulness of the mission, ethical issues and problems regarding the home front, one can imagine that a mission like this can cause difficulty in giving meaning to life. I mean that being on a mission in itself can be experienced as a fracture of the life story. People live separated from family, relatives and friends, sometimes they grow apart. In cases like these, feelings of powerlessness and uncertainty increase. In the area of the mission one sees the same colleagues day and night, there is hardly any privacy, of which tensions and annoyance may be a consequence. Orders from superiors can be unclear or experienced as not useful. Being motivated then becomes more difficult, especially when the mission itself is experienced as meaningless. Besides one can be confronted with violent or frustrating situations. What do you do in situations like that? Can you take any initiative or should you stay neutral at any cost?



The rough outline of the situation, of sometimes gripping events and developments, put pressure on individual responsibility, personal integrity, and the right of self-determination, which invokes a continuous relation to existence, the world and fellow human beings. Moral counselling then is dealing with a sometimes double fracture of the life story. With the client I look for contents that matter to him or her, in order to bring about a desired coherence in the story of their lives. The aim can be to let the client experience some grip on life again, when they indicate they want to be the director of their own biography. It should be said that not everybody is waiting for awareness of their aims in life and their personal norms and values, let alone a self-image.

To conclude, we can say that the content of individual meetings is characterised by a mixed presentation of problems. These problems on the one hand are concerned with the target group of the army's recruiting: people with poor or not completed education, sometimes a background of broken families or alien origins with a lack of integration (or a combination of all these matters). On the other hand, there is the new task for the army, the sending to critical areas.

### **Group work**

From dialogues with individual soldiers it appeared to me that quite a number of problems weren't strictly personal, but were on the edge of the personal sphere and the specific context of the military organisation during a mission. Therefore, it seemed good to me to take this fact into account, to turn it into themes and to make it discussible by offering group meetings, this also in order to replace the malfunctioning contemplative services. Depending on the aim I gave the group meeting several shapes. Hence I will discuss three kinds: organisational groups, theme groups and excursion groups.

1. Working with organisational groups: organisational groups are organisational relations that have different tasks in the area of the mission, such as executing social patrols, accompanying military convoys of former combating parties, and other tasks as outlined in the Dayton Peace Treaty. Although individual soldiers are used to working in those kinds of relations, a mission is something special because one is supposed to do things together, day and night, and that for six months. A regular exercise in Holland only requires being at this level for two or three weeks at most. It is easy to understand that after three or four weeks adjustment problems may occur and annoyances among soldiers themselves and towards the cadre will increase. During a mission these relations should be able to withstand all situations, including dangerous ones, that is, people must rely on each other, be able to trust one another blindly. That only succeeds when people within a group stay intact, when there is space for mutual acceptance, self-expression, co-decision making, the taking of a certain amount of individual responsibility and self-determination. On this point the interests of the organisation align with the vision on inter-human relationships.

In order to break negative group processes I started up teambuilding-like meetings, first for those groups who had the most urgent problems, then on request of the cadre for almost all groups. Meetings like these require a thorough inventory of the problems, and this means numerous individual meetings. Afterwards it is necessary to keep an eye on things and sometimes more than one session is needed. Although the position of a moral counsellor to supervise these meetings is ideal because he doesn't have a functional (power) relationship towards the unit, it is vital to retain neutrality. All parties, at all times, must be able to make use of your services as a moral counsellor. Therefore it is important to make clear arrangements with all parties involved.

After three or four months I repeated this process and noticed that the core of the problems had shifted from adjustment and habituation towards issues concerning the usefulness of the mission, regulation, the mode of managing, the living and working

policy on the base, and how they look upon the local inhabitants. In essence it's about questions such as 'how do I relate myself to me, to colleagues, to superiors, to regulation and to the natives?' Group meetings invite and stimulate self-reflection. It makes an appeal to their capabilities of self-insight, the taking of responsibility, putting into words what they value (e.g. privacy), their aims in life and why they make certain choices. Put differently: 'how do I keep my motivation and where do I find inspiration when, for instance, there are problems at the home front, the mission is rendered useless, regulation is experienced as suffocating?'

2. Working with theme groups: from individual meetings I noticed a need with a number of soldiers to meet regularly on bases of shared background or interests. The first one started at request of some soldiers of Moluccan origin. Soon this group grew to twelve members and every Sunday (the only day off) a meeting was held. There was a great need for them to fall back on each other, and by involving me it had, from their view of the outside world, a legitimate character. They didn't want to hear the reproach 'the dark guys cuddle together again'. Unfortunately negative reactions did arise. The sense of safety and security of being together was the main reasons to meet weekly, and that my presence provided support to the group was fine with me.

Besides that I as a moral counsellor found possibilities to go deeper into the group's specific aspects of giving meaning. In conversations I went into the integration issue of the Moluccan community in Dutch society and that of Moluccan soldiers within the armed forces. What does it mean to float or be thrown back and forth between two cultures and what are the consequences for your identity? How does that affect your self-image, where do you find self-esteem and self-appreciation? Some of them lacked a link to society and thought things would be different in the army. But here as well, despite their performances, they felt treated differently and not entirely part of the community. Such experiences lead to a sense of being powerless and uncertain. People feel they don't control their own lives, which makes it useless to evaluate their own actions or to look for future perspectives. In the company of companions in distress these issues were discussed (indirectly) and they found mutual support and understanding.

The aspects of giving meaning arose in the following themes: in the country of origin a tragedy is completing and here we are on a humanitarian mission; being different within the army; looking for their identity, not all group members were equally familiar with the cultural aspect of their origins. The group meetings stimulated the interest of those who until then didn't really connect with their origins. Thus there was talk about religion and its role within the community, about food, the process of mourning, music, upbringing and mixed relationships. After the mission we were to meet once more; the Moluccan Museum in Utrecht seemed a good starting for evaluating the mission.

This theme group invoked two reactions: a positive and negative one. Positive was the fact that a number of soldiers from Zeeland's four home bases responded to the group and set up mainly culinary meetings. A negative response came from the more 'right' orientated soldiers: 'For aliens within the army a lot of effort is done, such as taking into account their holidays, special food and now these meetings. Why isn't something organised for the 'regular' soldier?' The question is now how to deal with that. Isolate them? Exclude them? I don't think so, because exclusion is the core of the right wing thought, which is contrary to the Humanistic Ideal. It is through involvement and not exclusion of the 'other' that self-expression, self-determination and individual responsibility come about, which doesn't mean respect and tolerance for other people and opinions shouldn't sometimes be forced or safeguarded through battle.

Because I was already setting up a theme group for soldiers with a shared passion for the historic-cultural meaning of being a soldier, I decided to invite them for this theme group. Some of them accepted the invitation and actually participated. The group consisted of eight people, and whenever shift allowed we would meet on Wednesday

evenings. The idea was that everybody prepared something which had a particular interest and presented it to the group on the nights. So they had to learn to prepare and to hold a presentation; afterwards there was time for questions and discussion. Subject varied from the Battle at Thermopylae (the role of the Spartans) to the battle at Kursk (WW II, the role of the SS). It is interesting to see how notion like honour and courage slowly lose their meaning for the sake of notions such as efficiency and discipline.

The discussion wasn't limited to the past, but was connected with the actuality. How do they see their own role as a soldier and what images of soldier hood constitute that image? Especially 'right' orientated soldiers have an almost professional admiration for the completions of the Third Reich's elite corps, completions which could only come about through iron discipline and terror, which in turn is related to the lack of human respect of the nazi-ideology, based upon structural exclusion of other minds and ways of being. The odd thing is these people command in quite a different way; they appear very social, are communicative, execute orders well. They have a bearing surface among the men. This style of commanding contrasts or is inconsistent with their 'right' ideal of being a soldier. And this is when I find an entry into the discussion.

My aim was to evaluate their actions in terms of values (is it good, desirable or acceptable?) For instance, how far does discipline go and what does it mean for taking our own responsibility? Do notions like courage, honour and loyalty only apply to their own group and not others (local people, combating parties)? In other words, is it about intrinsic or instrumental values? Are they universal or located in time and place? This way of questioning invites the participants to a more (re)formulation and argumentation of their viewpoints. Here three things are noticed: a professional admiration for the elite troops of the Third Reich; an underdog position is chosen (the Third Reich has been beaten and the conqueror writes history); exclusion of 'other' groups is related to fear. For a number it is not racism (superior vs. inferior) that is the big issue, but more the fear of losing their own identity because of the 'other'. With facts and rational arguments something can be done about the first two, but the latter, exclusion, is on the level of emotion (fear). Taking the fear away by means of rational arguments is quite difficult, but I noticed expressing it in the security of a group could reduce fear. With the growth of identity in the group fear for the other lessens. Isolating people mean confirming and increasing their fears. I didn't have the illusion of changing mental images, but I did want to make people start thinking.

3. Working with excursion groups: every Saturday a group of some thirty soldiers would go to Sarajevo; one week under my supervision, the other under that of a chosen and instructed replacement. Every Sunday I organised a trip for ten to fifteen persons to Travnik. I had two reasons for organising these trips. First of all, I wanted to get people off the base, which is conducive to mental health and resilience. For an outsider it is difficult to understand how oppressing and suffocating it can be to share a small space with so many people. Not only is it limited in size, but also the lack of privacy and the tight regime contribute to a limitation of the possibilities for self-expression and self-determination. Increasing annoyances, impassivity, loss of motivation and behaviour against the grain are the result of this. Somewhere it has similarities with experiences of convicts. People are happy just to be able to walk on the streets to see shops, children and other 'normality's', to decide for themselves whether to take a left or right turn. This sense of freedom gives one space to be freer with themselves and others.

The second reasons for organising these excursions is my intention to adjust the image soldiers have of locals, i.e. the negative and one-sided picture of a collection of people who supposedly are historically convicted to their violence-genes. 'Just put a fence around them' or 'they all are criminals' are phrases frequently uttered, and not only by the lower ranks. So during the excursion I go more into the history and the part the superpowers play, and Bosnia's specific location in relation to cultures and religions. I try to change the dominating one-sided image and to bring in some details. They visit the

shattered town of Sarajevo or the medieval centre of Travnik. Perhaps it contributed to the understanding of why we were here and what we are doing here, and background knowledge on the conflict, the people and the cultures may be helpful. Of no less importance is how the military task is executed: is this done with respect towards each other and the local inhabitants or not? I thus hoped the gained experiences and impressions of the excursions would influence the execution of military task, if it would stimulate them to reflect upon their actions and behaviour. Can they execute their tasks while maintaining integrity and self-respect? In other words, can they remain loyal towards their own norms and values and have respect for the other simultaneously? The latter is possible when you obtain understanding of the other.

Besides these excursions I returned with a group of Dutchbatters of A-company of the time (Dutchbat III, 1995) to their former location: Simin Han. Other locations of that time, such as Potocari and Srebrenica, weren't allowed to be visited because of possible political sensitivities, people were afraid of incidents and negative publicity. All in all it was quite an organisation, firstly because at present there is a Russian unit in Simin Han with all the following barriers of language, secondly because I had the moral counsellor of that time (a pastor) and one of the wounded Dutch soldiers come over to witness the excursions with all of us. The aim was to collectively as companions in distress give a number of good but especially more painful experiences a place and meaning. The excursion was interchangeably very quiet and busy. Quiet at places where colleagues died or got wounded. The wounded veteran was able to visit the location he was shot, a happening he didn't experience consciously. Others were able to reconstruct the incident at the scene for him. At other moments people were very lively, especially when seeing what had changed in the area. A lot has been rebuilt and the economy flourishes. Memories came back and when things became too emotional people supported each other. But it was more than reliving it psychologically, there really came about a sense of a sharing relationship. Together people tried to give a difficult time a place in their biography, to make a meaningful whole of it. A Corporal told me about the powerless feeling he had when witnessing a wounded and later deceased soldier. He never wanted to be so powerless again. It influenced his life in the sense that he took medical training and went from being an infantryman to being a male nurse.

This all also fits into the collective aftercare concerning Dutchbat III and is a logical sequence of the return conferences in 1996 and the platoon reunion days in 1998. At the time of the mission under discussion here, I was the only one who was closely involved in the previous mission (Dutchbat III) and its tail. Although the 13<sup>th</sup> infantry battalion was the core of both missions, the changing of positions resulted in 50 to 60 people being involved in the mission. It doesn't take away the importance the excursion had for some that were closely involved.

## **Structural meetings**

Structural meetings cover the active participation in the interdisciplinary discussion body, the Social Medical Team (SMT). Moral counsellors from different bases take part in this, as well as the social worker, psychologist, senior medical officer and the head of staff-affairs, who is the president of the SMT. Here we discuss the problems of individual clients when more than one discipline is involved and signal trends and developments within the different units. Sometimes this results in directed advice to the battalion commander.

Another structural activity stands separately from the participation in the SMT and concerns the wanted and unwanted advice from the commander of the base (the team commander). An example of unwanted advice was related to the carrying of firearms on excursions. It was compulsory for everybody to bring his or her own gun. I noticed that such a showing of arms could be seen as provoking towards the locals. It then was

agreed with the commanders that a limited number of soldiers would carry handguns hidden on them. Another example is the setting up of a broad discussion between the team commander and the platoon commanders on their way of managing, this because some of the dialogues with individual soldiers and the connecting group meetings. From a part of the employees the way of managing was experienced as too tight and suffocating. Some members of the cadre were quite rigid in the application of regulations, based on control and containment. In their eyes the mission was a six-month exercise, with the outcome that there was no proper policy on accommodation and work. This led to a decreasing confidence in some commanders, a growing sense of unrest, increasing demotivation and a decreasing sense of privacy. In my view this puts pressure on some essential human values, such as self-determination, self-realisation and self-expression, and the chance to experience meaning becomes smaller. There was good reason for me to try to influence the organisation by kicking off the mentioned discussion.

It wasn't very surprising that a number of commanders had a practical outlook: the whole preparation was concerned with this aspect, whilst the non-operational aspects, such as accommodation and leisure received very little attention during preparation. The discussion with the cadre was also about how to apply regulation: strict at all times or in accordance with the situation at hand? This all is related with the image you as a commander have of soldiers. For example, do you regard them as independent individuals who can take responsibility or as persons who need continuous directions in keeping them from breaking the boundaries? What do you as a manager do to keep your men motivated, to prevent downtime, what is your vision on managing? et cetera.

I didn't have the illusion of being able to change the way some commanders command, but I did try to make it discussible from the viewpoint of an increased living and working climate. Afterwards some individuals came up to me for some advice and assistance in dealing with his platoon or group. The team commander thus asked my advice on the accommodation and leisure policy of the base; unfortunately this was after four months had passed. Yet it was possible to make some refinements, such as a dinner in town for all groups and their commanders which made an open evaluation of the mission possible. Not everything succeeded: I wasn't able to invoke changes in the bases' strict dress code. One should at all time wear the right uniform on base, even during the so-called 'time off'.

I also tried to influence the organisation in the field of assignment of duties to soldiers. Besides accompanying transport of former combating parties and the checking of arms supplies on the bases of these parties, having social patrols is a task of our unit. Its intention is to gather data from the local habitants. But soldiers never hear what is done with their information. My proposition to the team commander was to get some feedback from higher in the hierarchy towards the soldiers on what has happened to the information they provided and to let them know whether this information was useful at all. This gives them more insight into what they are doing and increases their involvement. When the job is experienced as useful, it will be easier to integrate it in the person's life story. Unfortunately, this idea couldn't be realised because some officials were reluctant to cooperate. Finally I made another proposition to involve soldiers more in their contribution to the mission.

The idea was to let the men participate in small-scale emergency aid. Having the experience of actually doing something useful, something real, would in my view certainly increase the soldier's commitment, the more because one can expect praise from the people. The knife would thus cut on both edges. According to some commanders this would contradict the principle of neutrality, but my counter argument was that aid should be provided regardless of who asks for it; someone in need appeals to your conscience, your humanity.

It started with the collecting of remains of Christmas parcels, food from our kitchen's abundance and medical supplies. Some became so enthusiastic they spontaneously set up toy programmes for primary schools. When you know how to increase commitment, this has an influence on the rate in which your job is regarded as meaningful. Here as well it means that in a later stage it will be easier to see the mission in accordance with the biography.

### **Concluding remarks**

In this article I tried to make clear my humanistic engagement is based upon viewpoints such as self-responsibility, living consciously, striving for self-knowledge and reflection on values, aims, and the making of choices. Starting points that are important for my assignment: helping to give meaning to life and the promotion of essential human values. I now think of values as integrity, self-determination, self-direction, self-realisation and self-expression. Values like these come about when people are given the opportunity, freedom and motivation to evaluate their doings in terms of values, experience grip on life, self-value and interpret present behaviour in terms of the future. One has the possibility of attaching coherence and ordering experiences in their own story of life. That's my view of giving meaning. The three tools at my disposition to give shape to this are individual dialogue, group meetings and structural meetings with the SMT and commanders.

Then I tried to show how the mentioned philosophical starting points influence the content of the meetings with individual soldiers. Thanks to the many talks I have, I start to recognise recurring themes. That's because many problems in giving meaning aren't strictly personal, but are more on the edge of the private sphere and the specific military context. This made group meetings the ideal way of giving systematic attention to these themes. I used the outcome and results of those meetings in an attempt to influence the organisation through advice, the introduction of a broad discussion and the signalling of the SMT and commanders. After all, the assignment of the sending organisation was 'to contribute to the humanisation of the army'. In executing this task I have to move from the periphery to the centre of the organisation in order to have influence for the sake of the realisation of my aims.

Finally, I wanted to make clear that my philosophical starting point influences the composition of my profession and that I am thus on a border in discriminating my job from confessional moral counsellors and social workers. This shaping way of working gives the organisation an idea of what they can expect of me and allows fellow moral counsellors and social workers an idea of my position.

## REUNION CONFERENCES FOR DUTCHBAT III, 1996-2005

### THE WAR AT HOME: who brings peace to the peacekeepers?

Bart Hetebrij

This article is based on a lecture given on 1 September 2004, on the occasion of the opening of the new building of the Spiritual Welfare Services, building 110 at the Frederik Barracks in The Hague. The author wishes to provide insight into the consequences of the events in Srebrenica for the soldiers involved and their families. He does so by describing a number of group sessions in which the elements of recognition, reconstruction and partners are central. The author also calls for more structural embedding of spiritual welfare in the aftercare process, because especially after the mission, soldiers may want to actively work on integrating their experiences in their belief system.

#### PREAMBLE

In the first half of 1995, Dutchbat III, which consisted of 13 Airmobile Infantry Battalion and a number of support units, took over the peacekeeping task from its predecessors, in order to protect the enclave of Srebrenica in eastern Bosnia. Almost at the end of its mission, the battalion was faced with a direct attack by Bosnian-Serb troops led by General Mladic. The enclave had been isolated from the outside world for some time, resulting in a shortage of diesel, food, supplies, and, of course, post. Incoming and outgoing traffic was impossible, which meant that soldiers going on leave were unable to get out of the enclave and those who had been on leave, one of whom was the author of this article, were unable to return. The result was that part of the battalion was in the enclave and part was either elsewhere in Bosnia, or in the Netherlands. The peacekeeping task proved to be an impossible mission when the enclave fell to the Bosnian Serbs in July 1995. More than 20,000 inhabitants were deported and most of the men were either killed out of view of Dutchbat or are still missing. A black page in the history of UN peace missions and a national trauma for the Netherlands. Although at first they were hailed as heroes, many Dutchbat soldiers encountered the first criticism of their actions very soon after their return. In an unprecedented media offensive, Dutchbat soldiers were held partly responsible for the genocide. The battalion was accused of cowardice. Neither the political nor the military leadership did anything to turn the tide. The blame for the failed UN operation was laid solely on the individual Dutchbat soldiers.

It was in this period that the author came up with the plan to organise platoon reunion days for Dutchbat III, to supplement the existing aftercare. In view of the similarities regarding the lack of recognition between veterans of the Netherlands East Indies and Dutchbat soldiers, the author decided to write a number of articles in the periodical of the Humanist Spiritual Welfare Service, *EGO*<sup>4</sup>. This brought him into contact with the Association of Dutch Military War and Service Victims (BNMO). Impressed by their programmes for veterans, the author proposed entering into a collaborative relationship with the BNMO to develop, prepare and participate in a programme item at the conferences.

In view of the traumatic events in the enclave and the negative publicity which followed, the plan was to bring together the platoons in their organic compositions if at all possible. The

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<sup>4</sup> EGO/summer 1996, Hetebrij, B. Nazorg voor Indië-gangers en VN Veteranen. Vier verhalen van toen en nu. [Aftercare for Netherlands East Indies veterans and UN veterans. Four stories, then and now.]

idea was that the participants could learn something from the other participants who had the same experiences, as well as from other experts, such as similar groups of veterans, and that they would be able to support each other with regard to adjustment problems and traumatic experiences. Groups can develop a huge dynamic, both in a negative and a positive sense. Naturally, we hoped for the latter, so that the group members could support each other and learn from each other how to cope better with the problems they were experiencing. The strategy was mainly aimed at **prevention**, but also at finding people who were already experiencing problems with coping.

In the case of Dutchbat III, it became clear that the lack of recognition in particular had a negative influence on the general human need to integrate experiences into a life perspective. That influence manifested itself in the self-image of a number of soldiers, which had become more negative, sometimes with consequences for their entire way of life. Examples are motivation problems at work and adjustment problems at home. This encouraged us to find ways to contribute to forms of recognition for the individual soldiers and for the battalion as a whole. The question is then how to set this up. Should our approach concentrate on the individual or on the group?

The latter approach was chosen, because of the existing group cohesion, which had only grown stronger as a result of the mission. Another important advantage of this method is that no distinction is made between those who ask for help and those who do not. We did not want those who asked for help to be excluded from their group. All of this resulted in a series of group meetings from 1996 through 2005. Important elements during these meetings were **recognition**, **reconstruction** and **partners**. These elements will each be discussed in a separate section.

## RECOGNITION

### **Identity, belief system and recognition**

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There is a relationship among identity, one's belief system, and understanding. The process that results in the world view that one has is essential for determining *who you are* and *what you value* because two basic tasks are expressed in that process. The first task is orientation, which allows a person to recognise and understand things. The second task is evaluation. Is it in your interests, does it suit you? To summarise, one's belief system enables one to organise one's thoughts to determine one's starting point and the direction in which one's actions are to be aimed, leading to a cohesive set of experiences. Extreme experiences can influence that process. A person may, for instance, have difficulty interpreting current actions and linking them to certain taxing mission experiences. For instance, some soldiers responded the same way at home as they had done in the mission area: tough and detached. They also sometimes found it difficult to evaluate actions in mission situations in terms of "was what I did or didn't do correct, desirable or acceptable, or not? And what did my fellow soldiers think?" In many mission situations, soldiers experienced feelings of powerlessness. They had no grip on their own lives, whereas the military identity is focused on control of the situation. Not much changed after the mission.

Strong accusations were made by the media, the soldiers' environment and even other units. The feelings of powerlessness continued. Developments which all in all did not contribute to a positive self-image and self-esteem.



Assuming that making and maintaining identity is a dialogical process, i.e. that significant others contribute to it, we can understand the significance of recognition, or the withholding of recognition. In the military culture, with its emphasis on group identity, recognition from significant others, the group members and the leadership is very important due to the strong interdependency (especially in combat situations). After the mission as well, however, recognition from significant others is important, because it makes a positive contribution to placing experiences in a context that relates to one's belief system. Significant others are partners, family, friends, colleagues, your environment and, in a wider context, the media, and the political and military leadership. They can give or withhold confirmation with regard to what you have done (whether it has value) and who you are (or have become).

### ***Lack of recognition***

When we refer to aftercare, we do not mean individual aftercare or the standard aftercare mentioned earlier, which takes place after every mission. In the case of Dutchbat III, we are referring to specific aftercare<sup>5</sup> in view of the extraordinary and taxing circumstances in which the battalion was operating. Those extraordinary circumstances do not require an elaborate explanation, as most readers will be familiar with the events. In any case, it concerns extreme experiences, linked with feelings of fear, guilt, shame and anger. Later, after the return from the mission area, the issue of ***lack of understanding*** from the environment begins to play a large role, both in the private environment and in the public eye.

This lack of understanding in particular contributed to the lack of recognition, which for some people slowed the process of coping with all the experiences. Possibly partly as a result, we observed an increase in dysfunctional behaviour of Dutchbat soldiers in the workplace, for instance conflicts, high levels of absenteeism through illness, lack of motivation and absence without leave.

These soldiers generally did not make the connection between their problems and their experiences in the mission area. Their colleagues, superiors or partners felt they had changed, for instance having become quieter or more aggressive, but they did not see it themselves. Others experienced mood swings or had relationship problems. Jitteriness, irritability, concentration problems, forgetfulness, apathy and sleeplessness were often-cited symptoms. Some noticed a change in their outlook on the world and in the way they perceived people. They had difficulty putting a meaning on their experiences and fitting them into their philosophy of life.

Besides the effect mentioned earlier, the lack of recognition has another consequence. Despite the wide range of care and help available from the Defence Social Services Agency, the Psychotherapy Division and the Spiritual Welfare Services, we felt we could deduce from various instances of direct and indirect contact that a number of soldiers were suffering from hidden problems which were not expressed explicitly and of which we did not know the extent or the seriousness. On the surface, everything appeared to be fine, but contact with family members and colleagues indicated that more was going on.

Those needing the most help were the ones who were the least receptive to offers of help. This category can be described as ***care-requiring care evaders***. In other words, the lack of recognition was having an effect on the use being made of the available care.

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<sup>5</sup> See also: Praktische Humanistiek, October 1997, volume 7. Hetebrij, B. 'Specifieke nazorg voor een bataljon in bijzondere omstandigheden'. [Specific aftercare for a battalion in special circumstances.]

### ***First step towards recognition***

On the basis of these signs we felt we should take the first step, in consultation with the other members of the Social Coordination Committee, towards an initial series of meetings aimed at finding recognition. Recognition of each other, for each other and for all of Dutchbat III; for the fact that they had performed impressively together, at times in the face of death. Individual recognition can only come from one's own group and from other groups of veterans with similar experiences. In addition, we hoped that there would be identification. In other words, that the participants would be able to discover, in contact with each other and with similar groups of veterans, that they are not alone in this situation. We felt we could thus promote self-insight, even for participants who would adopt a somewhat defensive attitude.

The first series of conferences took place in 1996. The aim in the first place was to achieve forms of recognition. One of the means through which to achieve this was for the soldiers to be reunited with colleagues whom they had lost touch with due to the rapid dispersal of the battalion upon its return. We wanted to give people the opportunity to look back together on the mission and the year that followed. The **participants as experts** took stock of the mission and the following period. A short overview: the mission itself often left people with feelings of powerlessness and frustration. Many soldiers also felt let down and were disappointed because they had been unable to finish their job. Many soldiers perceived the period after the mission as a negative time. They were frustrated by the reports in the media, but they also described the period as confusing, sometimes even as bewildering.

Positive aspects of the mission were the companionship and experience of life gained; negative aspects were the powerlessness, the frustration and the threat. With regard to the period after the mission, positive aspects were particularly the reception at home and the change in their outlook on life; negative aspects were the reactions from the public, the media and the politicians, but also the lack of aftercare. They sometimes received recognition in their private environment, but mostly from their Dutchbat III colleagues. They were negative about the reactions from soldiers outside Dutchbat III. Posttraumatic stress reactions, which were discussed in a special video film, were familiar to a large majority. A minority discovered that what was being discussed in the film also applied to them; sometimes it was strongly denied. Lastly, they felt that the reunion days had come too late and that they were too short. They referred remarkably often to the after-effects of the mission experiences and to problems that were still an issue at that time.

A second way to achieve forms of recognition was to enter into a dialogue with the 'older' veterans in order to share experiences. The BNMO was willing to cooperate in that respect. The idea was that Dutchbat veterans would receive support and would be able to learn something from the experiences of the BNMO veterans; about the after-effects of their UN experiences and how to cope with them adequately. It was, therefore, a preventive intervention.

Prior to the conference, the older veterans were shown the film *Dutchbat in vredesnaam* [*Dutchbat, for the sake of peace*], developed especially for the conference, containing a compilation of news fragments and amateur videos of the mission, the fall of the enclave and a section about symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder. This was important, because at first the older veterans perceived the Dutchbat soldiers as spoilt soldiers, with better equipment, better preparation, on a relatively short mission, with few losses, in other words soldiers of luxury. The film dispelled that view, for two reasons.

Despite the differences, compared with 50 years ago, the impact of fear, powerlessness and vulnerability proved to be the same. Secondly, they had to admit that they too had allowed themselves to be misled by the media coverage and public opinion.

The effect of the meetings with the younger veterans on the **BNMO veterans, the most appropriate experts**, was also important. They were able to teach the younger soldiers something and support them. The agony felt by the BNMO veterans thus was given a new meaning and put into a new perspective. A short overview of the dialogue between young and old: the older veterans spoke briefly of the meaning of the war experiences in their lives. This often led to reactions from the younger soldiers. They were sometimes shocked or surprised that the experiences had such long-lasting and serious after-effects. Sometimes the discussion would remain mainly informative, concentrating on the differences, such as the level of force and the duration of the mission. Much more often, however, there was recognition and they discussed the similarities in the experiences and the consequences. On that basis, a meaningful dialogue would develop, about personal experiences and how to cope with them.

A great many subjects were addressed during all the discussions. A number of those subjects stand out, such as *lack of understanding from the environment*. The younger veterans indicated there was a great lack of understanding, both in their private environment and in publicity and from politicians. That was immediately followed by subjects that were directly related to the extreme experiences. Those experiences caused most Dutchbat soldiers to view the world differently and they caused some of them to view themselves differently. All groups also discussed the question of whom you can talk to about your experiences and from whom you can expect understanding. The questions were also raised as to whether you can experience problems at a later date and when you should seek help. The positive experiences were not forgotten either: the companionship and the feeling of having done a lot of good work in spite of everything.

### ***More insight and recognition***

The meetings with older veterans gave the Dutchbat veterans more insight into their own functioning and into the reactions from their environment. For the younger veterans, it was an eye-opener to see that the war experiences still continue to play an important, often negative role in the veterans' lives decades later. The meetings allowed the BNMO veterans to put their past into a new perspective. The opportunity to pass on their advice and lessons to a younger generation of veterans put a new meaning on their own past. In addition, the BNMO veterans who participated in discussions with the younger veterans on more than one occasion often went through a process which had a therapeutic effect on themselves as well.

In their meetings with the veterans, the younger soldiers found recognition for their situation. They also recognised a number of phenomena which indicated posttraumatic stress reactions. The young veterans gained insight into coping with extreme experiences and into the significance of support from fellow soldiers, family and their environment in this respect. The living example of the BNMO veterans helped the Dutchbat veterans to see that help is sometimes needed and that it is no disgrace to ask for help. Experiencing and expressing emotions in the meetings with older veterans had a liberating effect on many of the soldiers. They discovered that as soldiers they do not have to shut themselves off from those emotions or to fight them. The group meetings encouraged the participants to keep in touch with one

other and also to involve colleagues who had not attended the meetings. Lastly, the meetings may have contributed to lowering the threshold for seeking help.

In addition, we as spiritual welfare officers gained a better picture of the problems in the groups and with individuals, which would make it easier for us to approach those people at a later date, provide them with advice if required, or refer them to professional aid or care.

## RECONSTRUCTION

### *Background*

Three years later, in 1998, we decided to organise a new series of meetings, this time at the barracks in Assen. These meetings were only for 13 Airmobile Battalion, as the supporting units of Dutchbat III had disappeared from our sight entirely. At the previous platoon reunions, the participants had already indicated they would like a repeat of these reunions, but this was not the primary reason for organising the new reunions. The primary reason lay in the strong emotional reactions (flashbacks) experienced by a number of soldiers during an exercise in Vogelsang, which led to them having to be removed from the exercise. Another occasion on which many soldiers experienced emotional stress was at the memorial service following the death of Jeffry Broere. They felt that there were things that had not been dealt with yet. All these incidents involved Alpha company, which had been based in Simin Han, outside the enclave, during the mission but which nonetheless lost one soldier in combat and had two seriously injured. Another element which may have played a part in the need to get together was the fact that the battalion was again under media fire due to alleged misconduct during the mission.

### *Need for reconstruction*

After having established that after three years a number of soldiers were still (or only just now) having problems coping, we had to decide how to deal with this. Should we opt for an individual, problem-oriented approach, or a group approach, not problem-oriented, as had been used during the previous platoon reunions. Another question was whether we should again focus on recognition and whether we should opt for the expertise of the BNMO veterans. It emerged from interviews with individual soldiers that there was a great need for information about the steps taken by the leadership of the company in question, regarding the various attacks which left one soldier dead and two others seriously wounded.

In addition, a number of the soldiers who had been involved in the incidents wanted feedback from their superiors regarding their role and conduct during the incidents. By the same token, the soldiers also wanted to discuss the role and conduct of their superiors. It emerged that there had been no adequate feedback in the mission area. There was a great need for a factual reconstruction of events. They wanted to obtain a complete picture. There was also a great need for recognition of the individual roles played during the incidents and possibly an even greater need for recognition from their superiors. It was notable fact that the need for recognition from the politicians, the military leadership and the media had become less, whereas it had played a prominent role in the previous meetings.

The method used during these reunions could be referred to as a form of debriefing. All personnel involved, including the company command, the medic and the wounded were invited to give a factual description of events at the various locations (compound, observation post, armoured vehicle, operations room) at the time of the incidents. The hectic situations

during the incidents had meant that many details had been missed and there was no overall picture of the situation. The contributions from personnel solved and clarified a number of uncertainties. For some, it removed feelings of frustration. Others were able to gain a more realistic picture of their own roles during the incidents. Mutual recognition was achieved.

After that, emotions could be added to the factual description. Feelings of powerlessness, mortal fear, anger, guilt and frustration were addressed. A senior soldier told the group, in the presence of his wounded colleague, that he had been scheduled to make the trip in question. This made him feel extremely guilty, and this had impeded his contact with the wounded colleague. There were more of these 'suppressed' emotions towards persons and situations which could be expressed on this occasion. The stories of the wounded also made a great impression. The lengthy rehabilitation process and the often bureaucratic regulations had meant they had not yet got round to coping with the dramatic events. Their presence encouraged the other participants to persevere and to fight the problems they encountered.

Some of the reactions from participants: "we became more mature and better able to put things into perspective. There is frustration over all the things we were unable to do. For a long time, I avoided situations I was not able to control. I have a fear of reliving the powerlessness. The psychologist says I am suffering from discophobia, I avoid large crowds of people. I have nightmares and flashbacks. We should have stayed together longer after the mission. I am more aggressive due to the frustrations experienced there. I felt lonely because I began studying immediately after I came back; that caused problems. I am more aggressive and impatient towards (new) colleagues. I don't go to Yugoslavian restaurants anymore. Dutchbat III is in the doghouse and within Dutchbat all the attention is focused on the last weeks in Srebrenica. Within the battalion, Alpha company is in the doghouse. I distrust others, including the Defence organisation and the politicians. I wouldn't go now if the mandate were the same. I have an appointment to see a psychologist soon, because I have been having back trouble for almost three years now." Many of these reactions were given by several people.

The group approach, not problem-oriented, met the wishes and expectations of the participants. And the 'reconstruction' model also proved to be the right choice. Many questions regarding the incidents were answered. For some, the events, their own role and the roles of others were put into a new perspective; for others, feelings of frustration were removed. The factual reconstruction of events and the expressing and sharing of the resulting emotions may have contributed to coping with and putting into perspective the experiences of the mission and the period after. All companies of 13 Battalion (Dutchbat III) took part in these conferences. We involved the BNMO in the preparations and partly during the reunions as well, for the following two reasons. Firstly, we wanted to familiarise all participants with the BNMO as part of Veterans Institute, so that they would be able to find their way to these organisations in the near or distant future. Secondly, and purely practically, we wanted to make use of the expertise and experiences of the BNMO and also give them the opportunity to gain knowledge with regard to young veterans, ultimately their target group.

Within all the participating units, the focus was on meeting the need for information and providing mutual support. Although the various units experienced the mission in different ways, there were also many similarities. The participants who were still serving as soldiers had difficulty accepting the decline in discipline and professionalism, mainly on the part of new colleagues. Participants who had since left the service had difficulty putting a meaning on their experiences and with the role of old buddies in their social lives. Contacts with old

buddies caused stress and conflicts in their relationships with partners and friends. It was as if they were living in two different worlds which could not longer be united. Others were still experiencing problems in their marriages, their jobs and in defining a purpose in their lives.

The meetings were repeated in 2001 and 2002. In 2001, the emphasis was on gaining insight into the supporting network. This was done by means of the so-called circle of contacts. You place yourself in the middle and use circles to indicate who belong to your network. Most participants gave their partner or family as the most important contact. In 2002, researchers from the Netherlands Institute for War Documentation (NIOD) explained their findings and the way in which the NIOD report had been compiled. The participants perceive the report and the explanation as a confirmation of where the responsibility actually lies. The facts brought forward by the researchers left several of the participants with an even more negative attitude towards the role of the military and political leadership and the role of the United Nations.

## PARTNERS

### **Background**

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When reviewing the reunions of the past years, we repeatedly noted the wish of a number of participants to somehow involve their partners. In 2004, a delegation from Bravo company started preparation work for the conference themselves, together with the BNMO. This was the first time that the initiative had not been taken by the Spiritual Welfare Services and that they did not play a part in the organisation, which says something about the motivation of a number of members of this unit. The author was asked, however, to set up and assist with the parallel ladies' programme. Not all the Dutchbat soldiers were equally happy about the presence of the partner group, however. Some feared that the special atmosphere of companionship among the soldiers would be disturbed. But the arguments in favour of inviting the partners carried more weight. One of the participants described it as follows. "Every one of us will always carry that period in Bosnia with him. It may manifest itself at any given moment and that is why it is important for our partners to know what we have been through."

### **Programme**

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The men had their own programme. They focused on the side of Bravo company's story that had not received much attention. A number of speakers talked about their experiences, for instance what it was like to be stuck in Zagreb after a leave period and not be able to go back to the enclave. What it was like later, back in the Netherlands, to see the fall of the enclave on television, then to feel guilty and to feel they had let their buddies down. The stories of the colleagues who had been taken hostage by the Serbs were also discussed. What life with the Serbs was like and what it was like to live for a long period under the threat of execution.

The extent to which the partners were able to talk about the events in Srebrenica with the soldiers varied. "There have been a lot of tears in our home", says one woman. "None at all in ours," is another woman's response. "I haven't seen the slightest emotion. The shutters are closed. He appears to have it all sorted, but only from a rational point of view". Another partner joins the discussion: "you can never quite tell whether he's just saying that he's got it all sorted. My husband left the cinema in a cold sweat during the movie "Saving Private

Ryan”. He can’t stand the sound of babies crying either, and I don’t know why.” Others recognise this situation: “I ask myself at times whether he has dealt with it, or whether he is just pretending he has. That is one of the reasons why I came here. I’m trying to get an idea of what the mission in Srebrenica was like, so that I will be able to support my husband better if he has problems with it later”. Some women are regularly faced with an internal conflict. “Sometimes I wonder, should I be doing something, or not? It’s really difficult. Maybe I’m trying to be part of something that I can’t be part of.”

Another partner says: “I haven’t really heard anything new, but hearing the whole story again in its entirety has made a few things fall into place. I’m already noticing that it’s a little easier to talk to my husband about it now. He didn’t really want to come here this weekend; he didn’t feel like it. You can’t talk about Srebrenica if you’re not ready to. It’s quite difficult for the guys to talk about their feelings on demand. My husband did go, though. Once he got there, he was happy to see all those faces again”.

The partners thought this first weekend had been useful. They wanted more of these days to be organised, so that they could exchange information, strengthen mutual support and together seek recognition for what they had been through with their partners over the past years.

The 2005 reunion was centred on the performance of a play entitled *Thuisfront* [Home front]. The play gives a probing account of how a soldier experiences a mission and what impact it has on him and his environment. It is not an indictment, but the author’s story of how the war went on inside him long after he had left the mission area. It is also about the people who are left behind, who are often just as alone as the soldiers. The play made a great impression on the Dutchbat soldiers and their partners. Some were very emotional.

After the play, one of the women said: “I only just met my husband a year and a half ago. He has been admitted with posttraumatic stress disorder. The treatment may last another year. My family doesn’t understand what I’m doing. I don’t get any support at all from the people around me, only ignorance. Here I’ve been able to talk about it for the first time and I feel understood”. The men recognised aspects of the play as well. One said: “I could really identify with the scene in which the main character says to his partner: ‘you’re having a baby, and the baby will have you, but that’s all it will have’. We had our first a year after the mission. I used to panic when the baby cried. My wife was afraid to leave me alone with our child. So I sought help, and I’m doing better now. And we now have a second child”.

The participants adopted very open attitudes during the discussions. There seemed to be more room for personal experiences and emotions than in previous years. The recently published book *Herinneringen aan Srebrenica* [Memories of Srebrenica] by journalists Praamsma, Peekel and Boumans also contributed to more openness during the discussions. In the book, 171 Dutchbat soldiers give honest and sincere accounts, in plain, soldiers’ words, of their bewildering experiences, of their solidarity with one another and of the dramas after their return. What is remarkable is the fact that the powerlessness during the mission evoked so many feelings of shame and guilt. The soldiers are now finally able to talk about these feelings, because they are mentioned frankly in the book and the soldiers have been able to read each other’s stories. One soldier said: “finally a book written by Dutchbat rather than about Dutchbat. The harsh reality has been put on paper. A reality which many journalists and politicians ignored. We are left with the memories, and you cannot ignore memories”. It is

indeed remarkable that it is only now becoming clear how many people sought help or are still receiving help.

### *THE ROLE OF THE SPIRITUAL WELFARE SERVICES.*

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During missions, soldiers are put to the test, often by extreme experiences, in terms of *who they are* and *what they value*. Evaluation and orientation are the tools a person has with which to assess whether they are still on the right track with regard to who they are, what they value and whether they can remain true to that. Intense impressions and experiences can blunt those tools, and as a result, the person, and especially their environment, may detect changes in their authenticity. The person may appear to have changed, often in a negative sense. He or she may not notice this at first. There can often be problems with motivation at work and relationship problems at home. It is the significant others who will point it out to the person in question. These ‘others’ can contribute to a properly functioning process for the person in question by penetrating the isolation, talking to them and providing support. That means recognising that the person is worthwhile, in terms of who he is and what he has achieved. At each stage of the process of evaluation and orientation, an individual’s belief system may change, sometimes for the better and sometimes for the worse.

The spiritual welfare services are concerned with the relationship between the belief system and identity. They saw organising recognition in a group form as a means of initiating the evaluation and orientation process in relation to the participants’ identities.

### IN CONCLUSION

In view of the nature and circumstances of the current missions in Iraq, Afghanistan and, possibly at a later stage central Africa or the Darfur region, the need to integrate experiences in a belief system is likely to increase rather than decrease. The Spiritual Welfare Services can now consider whether they can perhaps play a more permanent role in aftercare provided to units returning from missions. The question is, however, whether this aftercare is desirable for every type of mission and whether it is technically possible in terms of guidance, staffing of the Spiritual Welfare Training Centre etc.

Should there be a returning unit, however, which indicates to the Spiritual Welfare Services that there is a need, then it would be worthwhile using this model or parts thereof during a reunion conference. The group meetings can make use of the existing group cohesion and the positive ‘force’ in the group. It is not the model of the professional care worker that is central, therefore, but the model of the participants as fellow soldiers and experts. The participants are given the opportunity to **support** each other and to **learn** from each other with regard to putting a meaning on their experiences, coping with those experiences and giving them a place in their outlook on life. Other experts, such as similar, ‘older’ groups of veterans can make a contribution. An added effect is that the ‘older’ veteran’s contribution can have a therapeutic effect on himself as well, and can give him a new perspective on his existence. In the case of Dutchbat III, the main themes of the conferences were **recognition**, **reconstruction** and **partners**.

These themes, in that order, tied in with the participants’ needs at that particular moment, partly in view of the media coverage at various times. It should be noted, however, that the



themes of reconstruction and partners can in fact be considered special forms (or highlights of) the theme of recognition. The focal point in *recognition* is particularly the lack of recognition from the media and politicians. The need for recognition from fellow soldiers in particular plays an important role in *reconstruction*. And with *partners*, the focus is on recognition from those who are close to the soldier. They support the Dutchbat soldier and try to understand him or her. They too want recognition for what is sometimes a very difficult role. This answers the question in the sub-title of this article, ‘who brings peace to the peacekeepers?’. The answer is the (former) soldiers and their families. We as care workers can only facilitate. Lastly, the strategy of the conferences was aimed more at the **prevention** of problems by supporting each other early enough and learning from one another, than at finding problem cases.

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