



Support for Veterans in the Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

Every year, more than 3,000 military personnel leave the Dutch armed forces. Former military personnel may experience difficulties with their military-to-civilian transition and with navigating life in civilian society. The Dutch armed forces and other organizations provide support for military personnel that must provide for a smooth transition into civilian life and offer the conditions in which veterans can take up their life as part of Dutch society. This article briefly outlines the support for Dutch military personnel when they transition into civilian society and thereafter.

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Every year, more than 3,000 military personnel leave the Dutch armed forces. Former military personnel may experience difficulties with their military-to-civilian transition and with navigating life in civilian society when they are confronted with changes in one or more life domains or because of impaired health or well-being as a result of military experiences (Castro & Dursun, 2019; Castro et al., 2014; Duel, 2017; Segal et al., 2015).

The Dutch armed forces acknowledge that the transition to civilian life can be challenging for military personnel, and therefore, it offers transition support (Ministry of Defense, 2022b). Moreover, the Veterans Act (2012; Veterans Decree, 2014) tasks the Ministry of Defense to provide care for war and service victims and veterans, not only while serving, but also once they have left the armed forces. Also, that Act tasks the Ministry of Defense to enhance recognition and appreciation towards veterans.¹ Together, these measures must provide for a smooth transition into civilian life and offer the conditions in which veterans can take up their life as part of Dutch society.

This article briefly outlines the support for Dutch military personnel when they transition into civilian society and thereafter.

PERSONNEL SYSTEM OF THE DUTCH ARMED FORCES

Since the mid 1990s, the Dutch armed forces have been comprised of volunteer personnel. Currently, the military uses a Flexible Personnel System with three phases. Phase 1 begins when a person enters the military and lasts until the end of their initial contract (typically the basic training term and several years in which they perform one or more roles). Military personnel automatically enter Phase 2 having completed Phase 1. In Phase 2 they will be able to perform a variety of roles and prepare for jobs outside the Ministry of Defense, or they can try to qualify for a Phase 3 appointment; only non-commissioned officers and officers are employed in Phase 3. The Ministry of Defense will determine whether someone can be promoted or advance to Phase 3. Military personnel in Phases 1 and 2 may perform in their respective ranks for a limited period. When a soldier is promoted (e.g., from private to corporal or from corporal to sergeant), the term in the new rank starts again from scratch. An appointment in Phase 3 is equivalent to an appointment for an indefinite period (Ministry of Defense, 2007, 2015, 2017).²

At the start of 2022, the Dutch armed forces consisted of 41,542 military personnel (11.5% female).³ Of them, 28.0% were in Phase 1, 27.2% in Phase 2, and 44.8% in Phase 3. Also, 31.6% were soldiers or corporals, 43.6% were non-commissioned officers, and 24.7% were officers (Ministry

of Defense, 2022d). In 2021, 3,941 men and women had entered the military, whereas 3,271 military personnel had left the armed forces. From those who had left, servicemembers with a Phase 1 contract predominantly left basic training and most servicemembers with a Phase 2 contract left on the servicemember's own request. An important reason is that they have no options to be promoted, so, they search for options in civilian life before their contract ends. Servicemembers with a Phase 3 contract predominantly left the armed forces by taking job-related early retirement (Ministry of Defense, 2022d).

VETERANS IN THE NETHERLANDS

In the Netherlands, not every former servicemember is regarded as a veteran. The Veterans Act (2012, Article 1c.) defines a veteran as,

A servicemember, former servicemember, or former conscript of the Netherlands Armed Forces, or the Royal Dutch East Indies Army, as well as any former conscripted member of the Merchant Navy who served the Kingdom of the Netherlands in time of war or who took part in a mission to maintain or promote the international rule of law insofar as that mission was designated by order of Our Minister.

According to the definition, serving a deployment during a war or peacekeeping mission is virtually the only means of acquiring veteran status. Both active servicemembers and former servicemembers may qualify as a veteran. The distinction between veteran and non-veteran is relevant because veterans have a greater claim to support following military service than non-veterans. Likewise, war or service victims (hereafter: service victims) have a greater claim to support following military service whether they are veterans or not.

At the start of 2022, 25,800 active servicemembers were veterans (Ministry of Defense, 2022c) and 78,050 veterans had left military service. About 7% of the total veteran population is female (Ministry of Defense, 2022c). Among the veteran population are many thousands of individuals who had served and been deployed as conscripted military personnel before the mid-1990s.

HOW ARE DUTCH VETERANS DOING?

In general, veterans who have left the military do fine.⁴ About four in five would rate their quality of life as being good or very good (Duel & Reijnen, 2021; Reijnen & Duel, 2019). Still, a study among both active serving veterans and veterans who left the military found that 15% of all

respondents had had problems that impaired their daily functioning due to their deployment and another 15% had current problems (Duel et al., 2022). Thirty-seven percent of all respondents who have or had had problems reported problems in one domain of life, 54% in two to four domains of life, and 10% in five domains or more (see Table 1; Duel et al., 2022).

Of the veterans who had left the military, 38% had difficulties with transitioning to civilian life and 17% did not feel settled in civilian society (Duel et al., 2022). Issues that made the transition difficult were, among other things: (a) lack of support; (b) missing one’s comrades and colleagues; (c) differences between military and civilian culture; (d) military work experience, education, and training that did not match civilian job requirements; and (e) the abruptness of the transition and the idea that one did not belong to the military anymore (Duel et al., 2022). According to the veterans, it might have helped if support had been more tailored to their needs, had been offered for a prolonged period after leaving, and if they had had more options to get adjusted to civilian life; for example, in the form of work placements (Duel et al., 2022).

Since many of the veterans in the survey had left the military years ago, their experiences echo the support—or lack thereof—of the past. For example, a recent study among peacekeeping veterans (United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon; 1979–1985) showed that many of the conscripted veterans who participated in that mission left the military about one month after redeployment without any support or care whatsoever (Duel & Reijnen, 2022). Fortunately, over the years, the armed forces improved its care around the deployment-cycle and its transition support.

TYPE OF PROBLEM	%
Mental health problems	71
Relational problems	41
Problems with daily functioning in work, school, social life, etc.	25
Physical problems	23
Lack of meaningful daily activities	18
Lack of social contact	17
Having no future perspective	15
Financial problems	12
Problems with one’s living situation	6
Other problems*	13

Table 1 Type of deployment-related problems.

Note. * These are often less severe mental health problems.

Duel, Dirksen, & Reijnen (2022).

SUPPORT FOR MILITARY PERSONNEL WHEN LEAVING THE MILITARY AND AFTER TRANSITIONING TO CIVILIAN LIFE

SUPPORT FOR EVERY SERVICEMEMBER WHO HAS BEEN DISCHARGED VOLUNTARILY OR BECAUSE THEIR CONTRACT HAS ENDED

Military personnel are responsible for shaping their own development that may enhance one’s employability both within and outside the military. The Ministry of Defense offers the format of a Personal Development Plan in which the active servicemember describes agreed career goals and sets out the action that they must take in order to achieve those career goals. They can be assisted by a professional career counsellor (long-term development) and by their immediate superior officer (for their current or subsequent position). Equipped with a Personal Development Plan, military personnel can influence their own development and careers, expand their skill sets, and enhance their qualities. It enables military personnel to prepare for the next stage in their career, to advance in their current roles, or to prepare for a career outside the military. The agreements in the Personal Development Plan are binding for the Ministry of Defense and the servicemember, including when the servicemember is posted to a new position. If it is not possible to implement the agreements for compelling service reasons, an equivalent alternative will be offered. The Employability and Reservists Department is a source of assistance for servicemembers who wish or are obliged to leave the Defense organisation. Every effort is directed towards making sure that departing servicemembers have a new job to go to before their discharge date. The Employability and Reservists Department can also provide support for those wishing to set up their own businesses. Finally, all servicemembers who will be taking job-related early retirement (at the end of Phase 3) can attend a service leavers’ event where information about the non-material and material consequences of leaving service is provided (Ministry of Defense, n.d., 2007, 2017, 2022e).

SUPPORT FOR SOMEONE UNFIT FOR WORK

Military personnel who are unable to work owing to sickness have recourse to the Ministry of Defense’s healthcare organisations for medical care, psychological support, or social work services. When a servicemember is absent for six weeks as a result of illness, a reintegration process will be started by the commanding officer. The aim of the reintegration is to support the servicemember to return to their own job or a suitable (civilian) position in one’s own unit (Track 1a), or move to a suitable (civilian) position with the Ministry of Defense (Track 1b), or outside

the Defense organisation (Track 2) and to prevent the service members from having to rely on social security benefits. After six months the commanding officer reports the absent servicemember to the Reintegration Services Centre (Dienstcentrum Re-Integratie). After consultation with the Services Centre, it can be decided that a case manager from the Services Centre will take over the reintegration support or that the commanding officer continues their effort. When in Track 2, a specialised civilian reintegration organisation will be involved. Several facilities are in place to support the reintegration process and to increase the likelihood that the servicemember will be transferred from work-to-work, such as retraining, education, or financial support (Ministry of Defense, 2022f).

SUPPORT FOR SERVICE VICTIMS OR VETERANS WITH DEPLOYMENT-RELATED CARE NEEDS

Service victims and veterans with deployment-related care needs who are unable to work also have recourse to the healthcare organisations of the Ministry of Defense for medical care, psychological support, or social work services and have dealings with the Reintegration Services Centre. After their discharge, service victims and veterans with deployment-related care needs may avail themselves of specific healthcare services and assistance. The purpose of non-material and material assistance is to provide service victims and veterans with care and enable them to function well in their personal and social lives.

The National Healthcare System for Veterans (*Landelijk Zorgsysteem voor Veteranen* or LZV) provides service victims and veterans with care and assistance after their discharge on behalf of the Ministry of Defense (see Figure 1). Within the LZV, 11 highly-qualified institutions provide comprehensive care for veterans. The services include spiritual care and social work, as well as specialised psychotherapeutic or psychiatric assistance, ranging from short-term ambulatory treatment to intensive clinical care. The concept of stepped care forms the cornerstone: care should be as direct and as close to the client as possible and as intensive and specialised as necessary.

The Veteran Office, which is part of the Netherlands Veterans Institute, is where all care and assistance for service victims and veterans can be accessed. It directs service victims and veterans to the LZV for non-material help and the General Pension Fund for Public Employees for material help (*Algemeen Burgerlijk Pensioenfonds* or ABP; see Figure 2). A care coordinator, assigned by the Netherlands Veterans Institute, will counsel service victims and veterans throughout the care process and be their first point of contact.

PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR VETERANS AND INITIATIVES TO ENHANCE THAT SUPPORT

In general, the Dutch public appreciates its veterans. According to a survey, 80% of the public said veterans deserve outright public appreciation (Ministry of Defense, 2021). This finding has been more or less stable in recent years, as has been the public image of veterans. The public sees veterans as being dutiful, helpful, courageous, brave, and proud (Duel, 2015; Duel et al., 2017; Ministry of Defense, 2021). Also, 61% of the public is interested in veterans' issues (Ministry of Defense, 2021). Although veterans deserve public appreciation according to the public, 90% of the public indicated that they did nothing or very little to show veterans their appreciation (Ministry of Defense, 2021). Moreover, the public is quite sceptical about the Dutch participation in several military missions since the Second World War; this finding has also been stable in recent years (Ministry of Defense, 2021).

In general, the media are predominantly negative/neutral towards the Ministry of Defense, neutral towards military missions, and positive towards veterans (Cozzi

The National Healthcare System for Veterans consists of the following civilian and military organisations:

- Netherlands Veterans Institute with its (a) Veteran Office for 24/7 access to care, (b) case coordination for the coordination of care and material assistance provided by the General Pension Fund for Public Employees, (c) specialized social work, and (d) the management office of the National Healthcare System for Veterans.
- Spiritual Care Services (*Diensten Geestelijke Verzorging*) for spiritual care.
- The Ministry of Defense's welfare services (*Bedrijfsmaatschappelijk Werk Defensie*) for social work.
- The Military Mental Healthcare department (*Militaire Geestelijke Gezondheidszorg*) for mental health care.
- South Netherlands Psychotrauma Centre (*Psychotraumacentrum Zuid-Nederland*) for mental health care.
- GGZ-Drenthe mental healthcare institution, trauma centre for specialised mental health care referrals.
- ARQ Centrum '45, trauma centre for specialised mental health care referrals.
- Sinai Centrum, trauma centre for specialised mental health care referrals.
- Jellinek for addiction treatment.
- De Waag Forensic Institution (*Forensisch instituut de Waag*) for forensic treatment.
- Veterans' Intensive Treatment Unit, part of the Sinai Centrum (*Veteranen Intensieve Behandel Unit*) for intensive mental health treatment.

Figure 1 The organisations which together form the National Healthcare System for Veterans (LZV: Landelijk Zorgsysteem voor Veteranen).

et al., 2020). However, “the veteran” is not a big topic in print media, and when it is written about, it is mostly in regional newspapers. Previous studies found that most articles about veterans appeared in a four-month period

encompassing Remembrance Day (4 May), Liberation Day (5 May), and the Netherlands Veterans Day (last Saturday of June; Van Tilburg, 2014, 2016; Van Tilburg & Elands, 2013).

As mentioned, the Veterans Act (2012) tasks the Ministry of Defense to enhance recognition and appreciation towards veterans. These are expressed in various ways, e.g., a Veteran Card that gives access to various services and benefits, a decoration, veterans days per branch of service and facilitation of reunions, and through subsidizing the Netherlands Veterans Institute (see Figure 3). The National Healthcare System for Veterans and various forms of material support are also expressions of recognition and appreciation in itself. Besides these tangible forms of recognition and appreciation, the government clearly expresses its support for veterans in an annual veterans’ policy letter to the House of Representatives. Likewise, the King, as well as members of the cabinet or members of parliament, regularly express their support for veterans.⁵

In addition to the official activities, there are various public activities that aim to support veterans (see Figure 3). For example, municipalities organizing local veterans’ days, or a meeting centre or veterans’ cafe being opened in a municipality. Sometimes these activities are partly funded by the local government or by means of private initiatives.

<p>A. Financial measures</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Military Disability Pension (<i>Militair Invaliditeitspensioen</i>) 2. Special supplementary disability benefit (<i>Bijzondere invaliditeitsverhoging</i>) 3. Invalidity Pension Supplementary Benefit (<i>Verhoging Arbeidsongeschiktheidspensioen</i>) 4. Income support scheme 5. Full Compensation Scheme (<i>Regeling Volledige Schadevergoeding</i>) <p>B. Schemes</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Living support, including financial compensation or assistance with expenses for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a wheelchair • rehousing or furnishing or modifying the home • home help • recreation, development or sport • a modified bicycle • activities of daily living • childcare • family counselling 2. Work facilities that enable the veteran to remain prepared for the labour market or that maintain the veteran’s fitness for work 3. Financial compensation or assistance with expenses for medical care, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a hearing aid • a prosthesis • a special bed • psychological support • products that veterans can use to treat burn wounds themselves • an assistance dog for veterans • the excess payable for healthcare insurance • a larger contribution for health insurance 4. Special facilities if none is provided as intended by a different scheme. An exceptional case can be said to exist if failure to provide special facilities would result in the veteran incurring costs which he or she could reasonably be expected to bear and which would also lead to significant impoverishment of his or her existence or his or her mental decompensation. <p>C. Counselling during the process of finding a new job</p> <p>D. Debt counselling</p>
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Figure 2 Forms of material care and assistance provided by or on behalf of the Ministry of Defense.

Note. The list of schemes is non-exhaustive. Based on:

Ministry of Defense (2016, 2022c).

<https://wetten.overheid.nl/BWBR0008406/2015-06-24>.

<https://www.veteraneninstituut.nl/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Info-brochure-MAterieleHulp-Loket2018-DEFlow.pdf>.

<https://www.abp.nl/pensioen-bij-abp/speciaal-voor/militairen/schuldhulpverlening.aspx>.

Established by the Ministry of Defense

- *The Netherlands Veterans Institute* organizes the annual Netherlands Veterans Day, provides services to veterans, studies veterans themes and stimulates research on these themes, and provides care. In addition, it executes several activities to promote knowledge about veterans in society and a nuanced view about veterans among the public.

Examples of public activities

- *The Unknown Heroes Foundation* helps veterans to get a job.
- *The Help for Heroes Foundation* stimulates, initiates, and finances projects that enhance the well-being of military personnel, veterans and their home front.
- *The Support for Veterans’ Activities Foundation* (financially) supports activities that connects veterans with each other or that connect veterans with society.
- *The Veterans Platform*, on behalf of the more than 60 member organizations, looks after the interests of veterans and their home fronts so they are recognized and appreciated and receive care when needed.
- *The National Fund for Peace, Freedom, and Veteran Care* financially supports, among other objectives, initiatives that enhance appreciation for veterans. The fund receives its revenues from various national lotteries.

Figure 3 Organisations and initiatives to enhance recognition and appreciation for veterans.

DISCUSSION

In general, the Ministry of Defense provides support for those who leave the military, especially when unable to work, being a service victim, or being a veteran with deployment-related problems. For the latter two groups, that support and care is also available after they have left the military. The support for military personnel transitioning to civilian society should be viewed against the background of how people in the Netherlands are supported in general. In the Netherlands, a decent benefits system in the areas of employment, income, and care is available to all Dutch people. Moreover, everyone living or working in the Netherlands must take out basic health insurance, and for those on low incomes, the government makes a contribution in the form of a healthcare benefit. The support for military personnel leaving the armed forces and thereafter supplements the existing general support for Dutch citizens.

Nevertheless, according to the findings of Duel et al. (2022) there is a group of about 5% of the veterans who have left the military and who can be regarded as “disappointed” veterans. Their life is negatively affected by their deployment experiences, and they have deployment-related problems that impair their daily functioning. In general, their quality of life is low, their health is poor, and some of them appear to be isolated from society. Moreover, there is another group of about 13% of the veterans who have left the military and who seem to have difficulties with navigating life and who can be regarded as “searching” veterans. Their life is affected both positively and negatively by the deployment and they have deployment-related problems that impair their daily functioning. In general, their quality of life is modest, their health is impaired, and they too feel not settled in society. In both groups, many of them experience, or had experienced, barriers to care. Despite the wide range of available care and support, some veterans still struggle with deployment-related problems after receiving years of care and support. The question is how these veterans can be connected to the care and support that is available and, perhaps more importantly, whether the available care and support is tailored to their needs (Duel et al., 2022; Reijnen et al., 2022).

In addition, despite the ample initiatives to enhance the recognition and appreciation for veterans and the existing care for they receive, a considerable number of veterans remain critical towards the Ministry of Defense, the media and society according to the same research by Duel et al. (2022). In general, 37% of the veterans feel appreciated as a veteran whereas 21% do not, and 42% have no opinion regarding this topic. Still, 75% of the veterans found it important to receive appreciation (3% not important; 22% no opinion). Moreover, among veterans who have left the

armed forces, 38% felt supported by the Ministry of Defense (19% not supported; 43% no opinion) and 46% had faith in the existing care and support for veterans (14% no; 40% no opinion). Finding a solution by which many more veterans would feel supported and appreciated by the Ministry of Defense, the media, and society remains a challenging mission.

FUTURE CHALLENGES

The Ministry of Defense and organizations related to veterans affairs in the Netherlands continuously try to improve the recognition, appreciation, and care for veterans, and to strengthen the relation between society and (former) military personnel. Future challenges regarding these topics that should be addressed undoubtedly, will be the three issues just mentioned: (a) connecting veterans to the available care, (b) tailoring the care and support to existing needs, (c) and trying to enhance feelings of social recognition and appreciation among veterans.

Related, three important initiatives can be mentioned. Firstly, the armed forces will adopt a new personnel system in the coming years (Ministry of Defense, 2022a), which among other things, will try to strengthen the connection between the military and society (Ministry of Defense, 2022a). Undoubtedly, all the changes related to the new system will affect how military personnel will transition to civilian life in the future, how the transition will be experienced, and how (former) military personnel will fit in society.

Secondly, recently, the Ministry of Defense (2022b) evaluated its transition support. In her 2022 policy letter to the House of Representatives, the Minister of Defense (2022c) announced that the ministry and the various service branches will search for opportunities to improve the transition support to prevent or diminish problems among veterans due to their transitioning to civilian life.

Thirdly, together with other organizations such as the Netherlands Veterans Institute, the ABP, and the trade unions, the ministry is developing a modern system of benefits and schemes that better support veterans' reintegration into society and their civic participation (Ministry of Defense, 2022c).

CONCLUSION

The Dutch Ministry of Defense has the responsibility to provide support and care for servicemembers when they leave the military and transition to civilian life. More specifically, for service victims and veterans with deployment-related needs of care that support and care

are also available after they have left the military. Despite all the support and care provided, it is noteworthy that some veterans still struggle with military service-related problems or with navigating civilian life. It seems there is still much to be gained by tailoring the care and support to their specific needs and in helping them to find a new role as a participating citizen with the prospects, sense of purpose, and aims in life that come with that role.

NOTES

- 1 The Veterans Act and Veterans Decree also provide care for the relatives of veterans before, during, and after deployment. This deployment-related care also extends to the relatives when the veteran has left the armed forces.
- 2 The aforementioned procedure reflects the situation at the time of writing this paper (spring 2022). As of August 2023 soldiers and corporals can, when functioning well, obtain an appointment for an indefinite period (see: <https://www.defensie.nl/actueel/nieuws/2023/08/29/vaste-aanstellingen-bij-defensie-voor-manschappen-en-korporaals>).
- 3 In this article we will confine ourselves to describing the situation of regular military personnel.
- 4 To our knowledge there is no research into the health and well-being of non-veteran former military personnel in the Netherlands.
- 5 In fact, the Veterans Act was an initiative of the House of Representatives. It was carried unanimously by both the House of Representatives and the Senate, which can be seen as a sign of broad public support for veterans as expressed by all representatives.

COMPETING INTERESTS

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