The Dutch Veterans Interview Project: recognition and attention in exchange for valuable information
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'I shot at the enemy without hesitation, but today I wouldn't dare kill a chicken.'

Accounts from people who have been actively involved in warfare, which are then told in a peaceful and safe environment, are excellent resources for studying the shifts in norms and values between the military and the civilian realm. It is with this contention that the Netherlands Veterans Institute (VI) decided to engage, in an extensive oral history project consisting of 1.000 collected biographical interviews with a representative number of veterans from all recent conflicts and military missions involving the Netherlands. The oldest interviewees were conscripts in the defence of the Netherlands during the German invasion in May 1940; the youngest are professional military, trained for international operations such as those recently deployed in Afghanistan in the context of the International Stabilisation Force Afghanistan.

The project's aim was to make this oral data accessible to the general public, media, educators, as well as the academic community. It was thought that spreading knowledge of the personal experiences of men and women who have undergone the transition from civilian to military life and back, contributes to a better understanding of the position of such individuals in society and also provides insights into the social dynamics within the Armed Forces. Generating these type of narratives within the military context can be seen as a "productive exchange": it is a token of attention and recognition to the veteran from a representative of the Ministry of Defence in return for a retrospective account on how the organisation is seen by a former member now at liberty to speak openly about their experiences.

To put this oral history project into perspective, this text first offers a brief description of the history and mission of the VI. This is followed by an explanation on how oral history can be applied as a multidisciplinary method to provide insights into the social dynamics of the Armed Forces.

An Institute for Dutch War Veterans
Not being involved in a large-scale conflict such as a World War I has many advantages, but for generations of veterans of later, smaller conflicts, one could say there are also negative long-term consequences. Dutch neutrality during the First World War and the relatively small military role that the Netherlands played in the Second meant that Dutch society lacked both the experience and institutions usually created in the aftermath of war – when the need for psycho-social care arises and offering recognition to war veterans is imminent. The veterans of the unpopular and lost decolonisation war with Indonesia between 1945 and 1949 were the first to bear the consequences of this flaw.

Yet, due to their protests and a number of public controversies in the 1980s and 1990s, this topic was finally placed on the political agenda.[1]

One of the recommendations to the Ministry of Defence was the establishment of an institute that would take care of the legitimate interests of veterans. This was the incentive for various social partners to combine forces with regard to care for, recognition of, and

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[1] S.Scagliola, "The Silences and Myths of a dirty war, coming to terms with the Dutch-Indonesian Decolonization War (1945-1949)," in *European Review of History*, June 2007. Pp?

research on, veterans. In May, 2000 Prime Minister Wim Kok officially opened the Dutch Veterans Institute. The concentration of services and knowledge provided in one place, was now to the benefit of various generations of ex-military. In the meantime, the Dutch military contribution to international peace operations had been intensified in the aftermath of the Cold War in 1989.

The aftermath of the Srebrenica genocide in 1995, and the powerlessness felt by servicemen and women while deployed in peace-observing missions in general, were major issues in the veterans policy of the Nineties.

Characterisation of Oral Sources; an Oral History Archive

What is Oral History?

Oral history consists in eliciting a person to tell about his or her past while documenting the ensuing narrative so that it can be used as a historical resource. Unlike most written sources, the quality of the information is dependent on the interaction between two parties, the interviewee and the interviewer. Good preparation and an appropriate attitude on the part of the interviewer are crucial. When combined with an interviewee who possesses a sharp memory and verbal skills, this can result in a rich and detailed interview.[2] This type of oral history source can provide access to the experiences of social groups that are usually under-represented in written forms. By capturing narratives by representatives of groups who might lack verbal access to public life (as in the case of unskilled workers, women, ethnic minorities and homosexuals), oral history sources can function as a counter-weight against the dominant discourse of the more powerful in society.[3]

Oral history not only provides unknown facts or illuminates unknown aspects of known events, it also provides insight into the way common people attribute meaning to the world around them – how they live through and shape social processes. By focusing on the micro-level and covering daily life, emotions, behavioural routines, material culture, family life and life in small-combat units, military oral history is able to offer a better understanding of particular human relationships. This enhanced understanding emerges not only by what people tell – the content – but also by the way they shape their stories: the form.[4] It is this multi-layered character of oral sources that makes this type of data relevant for a variety of scholars. Oral historian, Valery Yaw refers to the emergent intellectual fields that work with memories and the 'trickle over effect' from related disciplines such as qualitative sociology, anthropology, biographical and literary studies, linguistics, communication and narrative studies, folklore studies and other interdisciplinary work exploring the relationship between memory, narrative and personal identity.[5] [this paragraph contains a lot of lists – maybe think about restructuring sentences?]

Oral History Compared to other Sources

By its very nature, oral history is about retrospective accounts, descriptions of experiences in the past that have been affected over time since they occurred. Even more so, this kind of history is about the place and meaning of experiences in someone's personal biography. For the historian who is less interested in the "psychological" dimension of reality than in factual

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[2] Refer to Leydesdorff, 2004, 80; Yaw, 2005, 3-4; Thomson and Perks, 2007, ix.
[3] Refer to Thompson, 1988; Leydesdorff, 2004, 23-42.
[4] See Portelli, 1991.
[5] See Yaw, 2006.

truth, these constructions of the past can be a challenge. He or she must know the context of the narrative and the complementary sources very well to be able to distinguish facts from fabrication.[6]

Additionally, in the realm of oral history it is uncommon to hide the identity of the speaker. Consequently the veterans that have contributed to the project cannot remain anonymous, as the goal of an oral history archive is precisely to offer the persons involved a platform from which to present their "authentic" stories. Moreover, knowledge about who is speaking, as well as when and where the event took place, enables other researchers to link one oral account to other types of sources. There are, of course, limits to this due to the National Archives Act, which obliges the keeper of a collection to ensure the protection of the privacy of the speaker and of third parties mentioned by them, at least for some period of time. The openness of many oral history projects with regard to the identity of a source represents a significantly different approach to the practice of journalists or social scientists, who generally guarantee their sources anonymity with the expectation to increase the chance of obtaining pieces of information that would otherwise remain hidden.[7]

A last point that characterizes material generated for an oral history archive is that it has been collected with future listeners in mind. Although the term "oral history" has a very broad meaning – referring to both individual researchers who conduct interviews with the goal of answering a specific research question, as more general archival efforts to create a broad range of experiences on a specific topic – oral history experts agree that the term is appropriate when the data is and remains available to third parties.

The Promises and Limitations of Oral Sources

As previously stated, an oral source is not a factual account of past experiences that can be retrieved from our brain like a computer file. It is an interpretation of an experience by an individual who can provide information on a historical topic which is relevant and unique. Of course, when experiences are put into words, our memory has already, both consciously and unconsciously, selected specific details that seem meaningful for the recall in a given situation. As time goes by, it is likely that people mix up details and dates and that their memory has been "tainted" by what has been heard or read about an event later on. When a story has been told over and over again, it can become "fossilized" – blocking the possibility for the interviewer to uncover new details by asking different questions.

Yet one can easily find the equivalent of these flaws in written sources, which are, after all, often the written form of something that one person told to another person. The chance of distortion in oral accounts certainly is no less than that in written sources when these represent the standpoint of a powerful authority that has a motive to control certain types of information. Goffman's concept of a 'total institution' refers to subcultures in hierarchical organisations where 'uneasy truths' and 'myths' form a threat to the central authority.[8]

Another problem is memory, especially with elder people. Yet someone who does not remember what happened yesterday or a week ago, can have a very sharp memory of an event that occurred 30 years ago, especially when the experience refers to an existential threat to one's life or to that of a comrade. These type of experiences tend to be strongly

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[6] See Yaw, 2005, pp. 8-9.

[7] Refer to Janoviceck,2006; Ni Laoire, 2007; Freund, 2009.

[8] See Goffman, 1957.

imprinted in our in memory.[9] Other aspects that should be taken into account when assessing the value of an oral source are the universal psychological tendency in retrospective accounts to justify one's behaviour and to present one's course of life as a logical sequence that can be steered, while in reality life is much more determined by coincidences.

In sum, an oral history account can be seen as a multi-layered message, were facts, fabrication, imagination and meanings attributed to experiences are intertwined – representing different aspects of the same memory. The narrative captured in an interview is the product of a dynamic process between interviewer and source.[10] Together, they enter a "negotiated" process between past and present, between official and personal history, between norms and values in the Armed Forces and in civilian life, between survival strategies in wartime and social desirable behaviour in peacetime and especially between what they did at the time and what they now think they did. This is why biographical interviews contain a wealth of information not only for oral historians but also for academic colleagues from the social sciences.

Organisation of the project and access to the content

The organisation of the Dutch Veterans Interview Project was in the hands of a coordinator – the author of this contribution – and an assistant, who were responsible for the recruitment of the respondents, for an appropriate match between the veteran and one of the interviewers as well as for the logistics of interview training, data collection, processing and archiving. A team of fifteen interviewers – most of them freelancers with an academic training or a background in journalism – received training on a regular basis with regard to the methodology of oral history as well as the military history of the various conflicts and military missions.

The interviewers were recruited in different regions of the country in order to be able to interview the veterans at home, in a familiar setting, without having to travel to far. After having conducted the interview, the interviewer could log in from home with a password to the database and insert the metadata of the audio recording according to a set of guidelines. First the personal data and data related to military career would be filled in. Subsequently, the interview itself would be summarised in writing, based on units of 10-minute recordings with key words attributed to each segment. Also acronyms, lingo and other specific terms used by the respondent would be listed, anticipating developments in speech retrieval techniques.

At the end of the interview the respondent signs a consent form in duplicate and transfers the copyright of the interview to the VI. The interviewers are asked to write a short brief on how the interview was conducted. This helped the staff to determine which passages that are privacy-sensitive may be eligible for classified status.

After receiving the signed consent statement, the veteran receives a complimentary CD audio copy of their interview, accompanied by a letter of thanks. It is remarkable how often the interview on the CD would be the first time that some of the experiences of the veteran become the possession of the whole family. After his death, the sound of the veteran's voice on the CD remains a cherished piece of memory for those who stay behind.

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[9] Refer to Yaw, 2005, 35-50; Draaisma, 2008.

[10] Refer to Portelli, 1991; Leydesdorff, 2004.

As half of the respondents had agreed to grant free access to their interviews, at the end of the project in September 2011, 500 interviews could be accessed through the Internet after registration on the VI website. The other half of the collection, which often contains sensitive information, can only be accessed with a password after signing an agreement about respecting certain archival rules regarding appropriate use of the documents. As the audio soundtrack as well as the metadata (summaries, personal data, chronology of an individual's military career, key-words), have been stored in a digital format, the whole collection can be navigated with the help of a search engine in three environments: one for the general public with the help of basic search fields, one for researchers with extended search fields, and one for the administrator of the collection which also allows research in all fields and in classified interviews.

The large amount of practical knowledge, unusual experiences, personal opinions and individual reflections supplied by the respondent ex-soldiers yielded by the project, confirmed the initial assumption that this archive would be a rich source of information for various audiences.

Who talks and who doesn't and why
The ambition of this project was the creation of a collection representative of the variety of conflicts and missions Dutch militia were engaged in, and, within these missions, the collection also represented the diversity of experience. This means the ambition was to give equal attention to representatives of the various branches of the Armed Forces, their soldiers' and officers' ranks and functions, as well as gender. Within a conflict or mission history, an effort was made to take into account differences in time and space as deployments in different periods, in different parts of a country, can differ significantly.
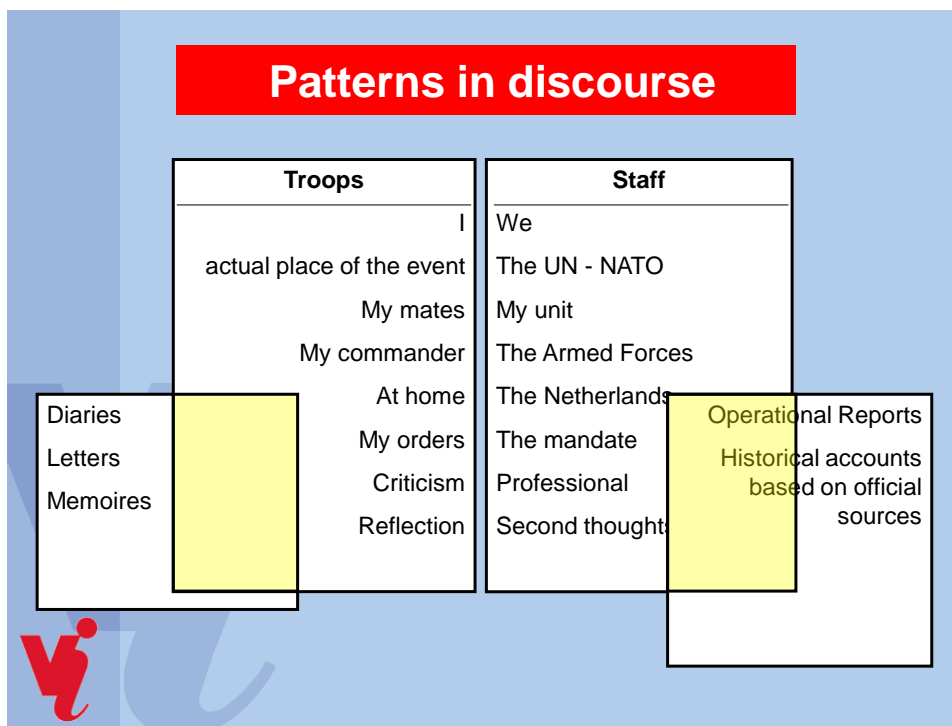
The choice to select 1000 veterans out of a number of approximately 120,000 Dutch veterans, was partly based on the symbolic appeal of a round figure, partly on the belief that 1000 interviews would be enough to cover existing diversities and provide a satisfactory degree of representativeness. The latter was a challenge, since what is desirable, was not always possible.

Of the total population, after all, only two-thirds of the veterans are registered in the address database of the VI and receive the contact instrument, the monthly magazine: *Checkpoint,* where advertisements were placed. Veterans also reacted to articles in professional magazines, to lectures held during veteran reunions, media coverage on the project, and to calls on new social media.

One challenge was to reach the younger group of veterans since many of them were not registered at the VI. To reach them, advertisements were placed in trade journals of professions that are chosen by many young veterans – journals reaching police-, transport- or ambulance-personnel. Their cooperation in the interview project was important as we wanted to know whether they had developed a different mindset with regard to their identity as veterans.

In addition to finding a diverse but balanced group of respondents, another problem was finding enough former higher-profile members of staff who were willing to tell their story. In general, the "urge to speak" was stronger among veterans from the lower ranks. From the interviewer's point of view it would have been desirable to begin interviews higher up in the military hierarchy, talking first to former commanders who could offer an overview of the entire mission because of their position of responsibility. Yet the "higher ups" had, in the course of their lives, already been asked several times about their experiences.

Therefore their motivation for allowing themselves to be interviewed was often not very strong. Moreover, as representatives of the higher authorities, they tended to reproduce information that reflected the story which can be found in written sources. Their status, knowledge and skills are connected to the official policy, and they have been trained to reproduce the politically correct and militarily desirable version of what happened during a military mission. Counter-narratives and "second thoughts" are mostly found among older ex-commanders. They can look back and reassess what has been accomplished without the risk of damaging their own reputation or that of some colleague. A very small group that has a strong motivation to speak are the – often low-ranking dissenters, who have distanced themselves from the organisation.

Patterns in discourse

Troops		Staff	
	I	We	
	actual place of the event	The UN - NATO	
	My mates	My unit	
	My commander	The Armed Forces	
Diaries	At home	The Netherlands	Operational Reports
Letters	My orders	The mandate	Historical accounts
Memoires	Criticism	Professional	based on official
	Reflection	Second thoughts	sources

In the lower ranks the need to express one's personal feelings and opinions tends to be stronger. Most of these individuals have never had this opportunity, nor have they had the chance to share their experiences with peers in civilian society – as former officers often do in establishment clubs. Besides the aspect of lacking motivation to speak among upper-ranking officers, another limitation we encountered in this interview project was the fact that commanders of recent missions are still in active service. The VI does not have the permission to interview active service personnel due to the risk of disclosing classified information. This is also a consequence of the definition of a veteran in the Netherlands – former military personnel who participated in war or international operations – and thereby of the scope of the VI.

Another factor motivating participation in this interview project was the need to speak out about a personal grievance linked to the active service period. Finding the right balance between relatively neutral, factual interview accounts and listening to strongly emotional or political narratives from veterans who had some old account to settle with the Ministry of Defence was essential in this project as our aim was to provide a representative collection. Nevertheless, there was also an element of self-selection when it came to the ultimate composition of the thousand interviews.

We also found that there is a strong difference in the readiness to tell one's life story between older and younger veterans. Members of the older group we found to be in a phase of looking back on their lives, whereas the younger group left the Armed Forces after their temporary contract period, still having half a life or more before them. As is shown in the scheme beneath, they have an interest in keeping inconvenient truths to themselves, and thus a specific category of personal experiences is left out of history for some time. There were marked differences in the responses from the oldest generation who had been in military service as conscripts during WWII and the decolonisation-war with Indonesia (1945-1949) and those who had served in the following peacekeeping and enforcing missions from Unifil (Lebanon, 1979-1984) onwards.
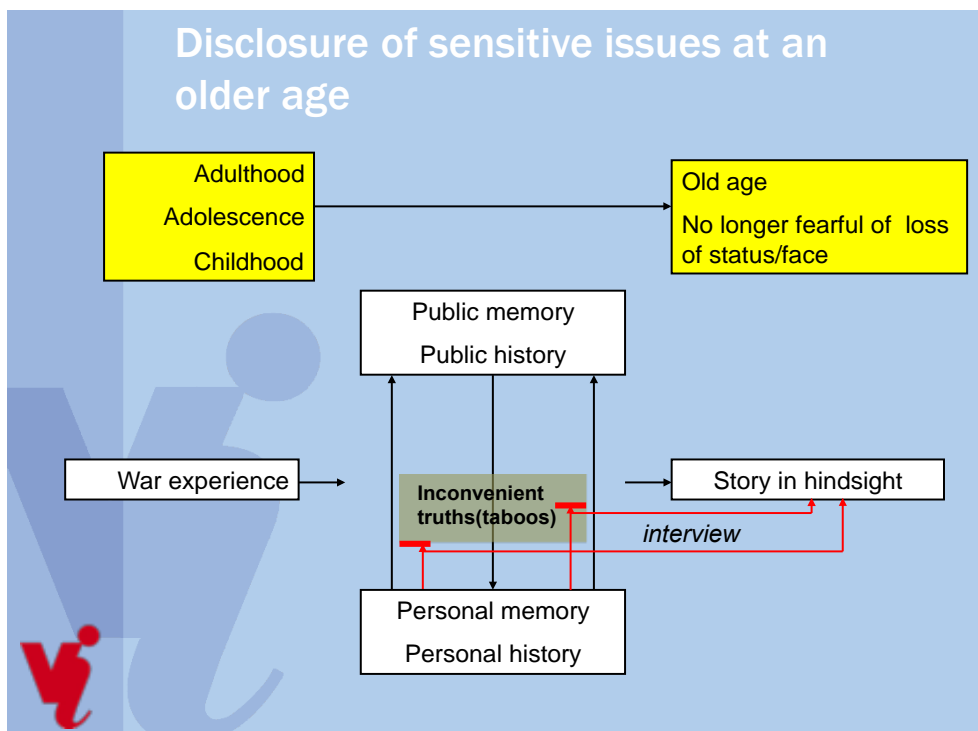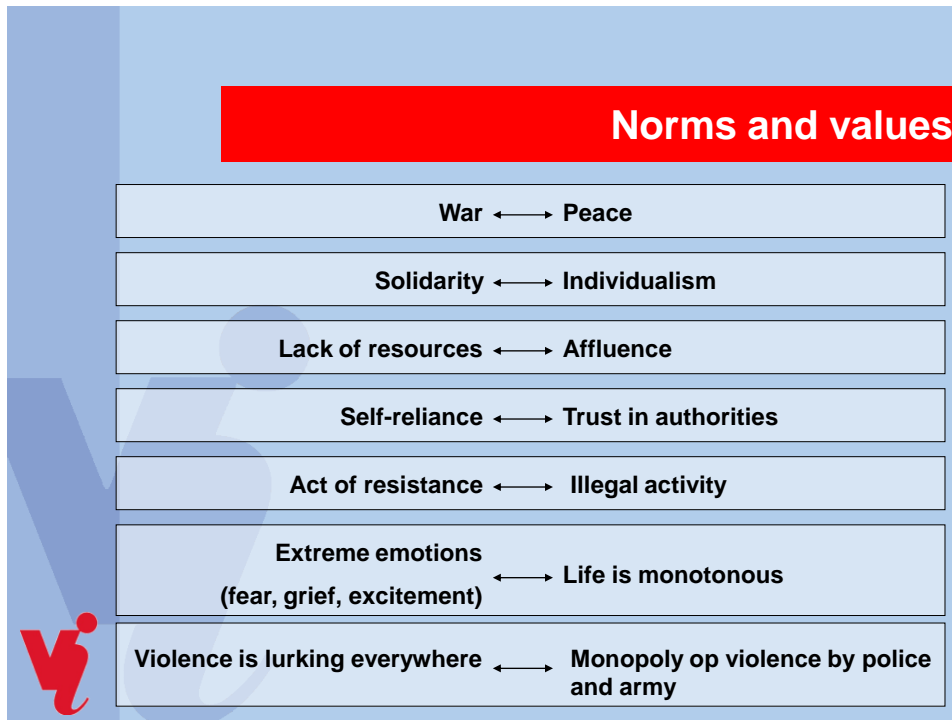

What is the interview about?
The interview of about 2.5 hours follows a semi-structured biographical approach, in which the different stages of life are covered such as family background and education, entry into the armed forces, training, experiences during the conflict/military mission, return to Netherlands and finally the transition to the current situation in civil society. The main focus of the interview is on the personal experiences during the military or peace-keeping mission and the aftermath. These include sub-items such as: first impression of the deployment and adaptation, the actual execution of the task, social aspects, contacts with the home front, intense experiences, satisfaction, reintegration upon return to the Netherlands, looking back on the mission and striking a balance in terms of taking pride in one's role or expressing regrets about one's participation. The autobiographical nature of the interviews is essential in order to understand whom the veteran was before he entered the armed forces and how he or she developed after reintegration in civilian society.

Compared to traditional military history sources that focus exclusively on operational aspects, these oral history sources provide continuity on the personal, micro-level and illustrate the relation to the wider public knowledge on specific historical events. As warfare and military issues are usually phrased in formal discourses generated and controlled by an institute that represents the interests of the nation state, one could characterise the experiences within the perspective of one's biography described in the interviews as "denationalised" and "deinstitutionalised".
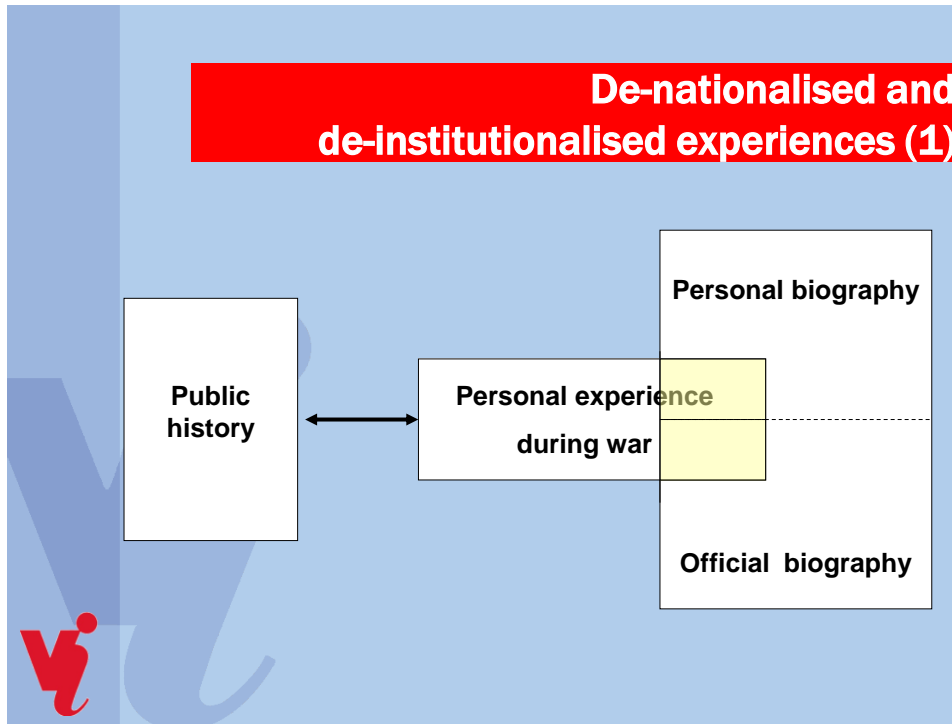
At the same time they offer the possibility of reflecting on the adaptation of norms and values during the transition from the military to the civil realm or from circumstances of war to those of peace.

Norms and values

War ←→ Peace

Solidarity ←→ Individualism

Lack of resources ←→ Affluence

Self-reliance ←→ Trust in authorities

Act of resistance ←→ Illegal activity

Extreme emotions (fear, grief, excitement) ←→ Life is monotonous

Violence is lurking everywhere ←→ Monopoly op violence by police and army

This structure results in recurring themes which offer the possibility of comparing one specific theme between different generations of veterans. Yet the topic list is not a strait-jacket; it also provides opportunities for interviewers to dig deeper regarding new, unexpected aspects of someone's life trajectory as they become apparent. This is, after all, the added value of consulting living sources to "dead" sources such as minutes, photos and letters – they can still talk back and in doing so sometimes cause an unexpected turn to an interview.
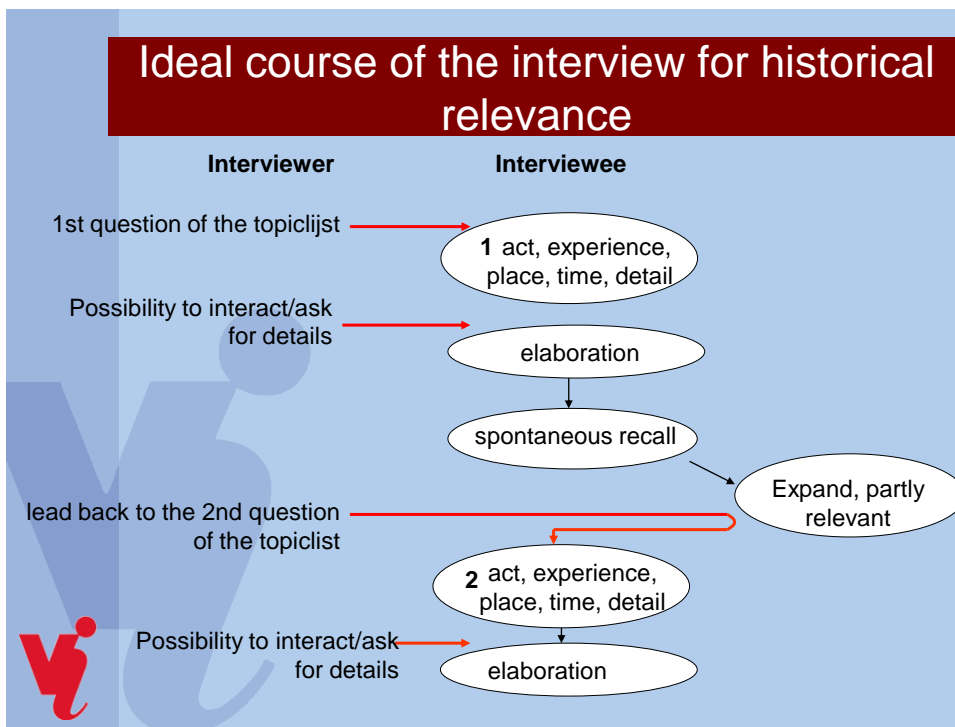
This approach demanded specific instructions for the interviewers in order to control the process. They have been asked to give the interview the form of a 'steered monologue', with an absent future listener in mind. So the narrative of the speaker takes the lead. When he or she describes events and experiences, the interviewer is instructed to ask specifically were and when the events took place. The reason for this is that if used as a historical source, the interview has to include clear clues that make it possible to link it with other, complementary sources. In practice, the character of the answers that were given is very dependent on the personality and narrative style of the storyteller. The interviewers are, however, instructed to steer the interview in a direction that makes sure that all items on the list of topics were covered.

The topics and sub-topics were generally dealt with in chronological order, and the respondents were asked to specify time and place, before elaborating on details related to one's personal role as military or veteran. When an interviewed veteran begins to express themselves in general terms, using the term "we" or giving their opinion on unrelated political issues, the interviewer must lead the respondent to the next question on the list of topics. However, not all interviewees accepted to be led by the interviewer in this way.

A specific problem is the failing memory of older veterans. To minimise this issue, respondents from the older generation were all contacted by telephone in advance to get an idea as to whether they were suitable candidates. In most cases a phone conversation would give a good picture of the capacity of people to tell a coherent story. In cases where memory

failed, the interviewers were instructed to let the veteran determine the agenda on the basis of what he or she considered important to tell.

One feature that is recurrent in the interview material is the tendency of former officers from the higher staff in the military hierarchy to identify strongly with the formal declaratory policy of the military institution. This sometimes comes down to reproducing facts, figures and policy guidelines that can be found in other sources. Again, the interviewers are, in such cases, instructed to steer the interview back in the direction of personal memories and reflections.

Ideal course of the interview for historical relevance

Interviewer — **Interviewee**

- 1st question of the topiclijst → **1** act, experience, place, time, detail
- Possibility to interact/ask for details → elaboration
- spontaneous recall
- Expand, partly relevant
- lead back to the 2nd question of the topiclist → **2** act, experience, place, time, detail
- Possibility to interact/ask for details → elaboration

In general, the quality of the archive is dependent on the ability of the interviewers to make good assessments on the investment in time and the expected result. A good balance has to be found between steering the respondent and giving him or her space to elaborate. This means the interviewer has to have enough background to be able to assess the historical relevance of what is being said, including the elaborations on specific sidetracks. This process of steering between mainstream and side-stream narratives was frequently discussed between interviewers and the coordinator in order to find a midway between wider relevance and personal idiosyncrasy.

Preliminary assessment

As the project has only just concluded it is still too early to present a thorough evaluation on whether the initial goals of the project have been achieved. Yet the efforts successfully realised during the course of the project – in terms of the educational and academic realm and the positive feedback from the veteran community – suggest that oral history is an effective method of combining a policy of veteran care and recognition, which is not based on the usual therapeutic/medical or heroic/dramatic discourse, with generating essential historical and social-scientific data. This potential for broad use is connected to the fact that it concerns a "digitally born" collection. In fact, several innovative initiatives were realised together with ICT-researchers. These included multidisciplinary digital publication with

audio-fragments, a speech retrieval annotation tool, and an interview meta-data standardisation-project to improve access to digital interview-data for researchers. In the references the links to these projects are included.

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Links to digital projects related to the Interviewproject:

The public site with unrestricted access to 500 interviews:
http://interview.veteraneninstituut.nl

An interdisciplinary enhanced digital publication: www.watveteranenvertellen.nl
http://www.youtube.com - enhanced publication Veteran Tapes

Speech retrieval and oral history annotation tool:
http://wwwwlands2.let.kun.nl/spex/annotationtool