

Note to Editors: Check against Delivery

Chairman, your Excellencies, veterans,

It's an honour to be here. It's an honour for *me* to be here among you: veterans from around the world. I see gathered here today veterans who fought in wars that took place decades ago. I see gathered here today veterans who served in missions that continue to this very day. And I see gathered here today veterans who may have once faced each other on the front line. Today you all sit at the same table, striving for the same goals.

By doing so, you set an example for all of us. You tell us - politicians and civilians - an important story. A story of companionship and personal experience. A story of combat. But also a story of peace and reconciliation.

It's not always easy to share those stories. As the Dutch State-Secretary for Defence and Veterans Affairs, I have learned that many of you might have kept silent for years. Every Sunday after church, I talk with Joop Bouma, an 86-year old man from my hometown. For years and years we have been meeting on Sundays to talk about everyday life. One day, I asked him about his wedding anniversary. We came to talk about the past. And then he told me that he was a veteran of the colonial Dutch-Indies conflict in the fifties. I was surprised and asked him: Why didn't you ever talk about that before? He said: "Well, why would I? It's not that special. I just did my job. I just did what I had to do."

For me, that is typical of the modesty of most veterans. You did your duty. And that's that. Why talk about it any further? I respect that. But it *is* important that you share your stories. Important for yourselves, your family and friends. Important for your country. And important for the next generation. Because we live in a world whose memory is sometimes short. We live in a world that tends all too easily to forget the lessons of history. That's why we want to hear your stories, that's why we *need* to hear your stories. Today, tomorrow and into the future.

The work of your Federation contributes greatly to a climate in which this is possible. A climate of acknowledgement, appreciation and care. I am therefore proud to say that the Netherlands is a founding member of your Federation. And I am proud to say that we in the Netherlands appreciate and honour our veterans back home as you are doing here today.

I don't know if you have ever been to the Netherlands. But I can certainly recommend a visit to our residential capital The Hague. Especially on the last Saturday of June, which is the closest Saturday to the 29th of June, the birthday of our late Prince Bernhard. He is the father of our present Queen Beatrix and was the most revered veteran in my country. On the last Saturday of June, the inner city of The Hague takes on the green of thousands of veterans and their vehicles for the celebration of Nederlandse Veteranendag, or Dutch Veterans Day.

I must say, it's an absolute joy and honour to be part of this day. Thousands and thousands of people come from all over Holland and abroad to pay homage to all Dutch Veterans. Veterans from all generations. Veterans from World War II, from Korea and other UN-missions, from Bosnia, Iraq and Afghanistan.

Young families line the streets, alongside the elderly who experienced the Second World War at first hand. They watch the parade of veterans and salute those men and women who fought for our freedom and prosperity, who battled enemy forces and terrorists, who built schools and hospitals, who provided care and gave hope.

And they see proud veterans. Veterans who came back from their missions changed men. And usually for the better. They have gained experience in life. They have gained the moral insight that comes from having had great responsibility. They have broadened their insight into humanity through exposure to different cultures and different countries.

It troubles me sometimes that veterans are so often only portrayed as scarred and traumatised people. Just last week, an extensive doctoral thesis on this subject was published in the Netherlands. Researchers interviewed more than fifteen hundred veterans about their experiences and the effect that they felt their mission has had on their personal and professional life. An overwhelming majority stated their mission

had had strong positive effects. An overwhelming majority stated they came back stronger and more complete.

And I assure you; the university that conducted the study concluded what others already knew! The eagerness of business and other organisations to recruit from among our military personnel might be the best proof of all. They all stand in line to employ them. Because of their skills and experiences they gained during these missions. Of course, we don't let them go that easily.....!

The Dutch Armed Forces are grateful for the efforts of our men and women in battle and peacekeeping. The most exceptional thing one can do for one's country is risk one's life for it. To underscore the esteem in which we hold the veterans, our prime minister himself has put considerable effort into establishing official flag etiquette for Dutch Veterans Day. His efforts succeeded. Just a few months ago, the Dutch government proclaimed that our Dutch Veterans Day is on a par with our National Days of Commemoration and Liberation and the Queen's official birthday. Dutch Veterans Day is now one of just four days in the year on which all Dutch citizens and government buildings may fly the Dutch flag. As a symbol of our appreciation and acknowledgement.

But under this symbol of raising our Red, White and Blue lies a deeper policy. We don't just honour our veterans when they parade by on a sunny day, healthy and happy, in their best uniforms. We, as the Ministry of Defence, support our veterans for better **and** for worse. Because even though the majority of veterans come back with a smile, some **do** have a different story. A story where shiny medals alone cannot console nor colourful parades repair the damage done. The damage of having your legs blown away by an IED. The damage of seeing your colleague go down and you being unable to rescue him. The damage of having had to throw a grenade which might have killed civilians. These events impact deeply. In the personal life of a soldier. In his relationships with his family, friends and colleagues. It impacts on the military. And it impacts on society.

For serving personnel, the Armed Forces have their own military health-care system, with features that include a good tracking system, the availability of spiritual advisors and an excellent deployment-preparation system. To ensure that the personnel are ready for deployment well before the mission starts.

Once a soldier who has participated in a military operation abroad leaves the Dutch Armed Forces, he is declared a veteran. From that point forward, he benefits from the provisions of our veterans policy. This policy is based on three pillars: Acknowledgement, Appreciation and Aftercare. That includes the civilian medical care that everyone in the country enjoys. The Dutch universal health care system is widely acknowledged – including not too long ago by U.S. President Obama – as being an excellent system based on a high degree of solidarity. All military personnel, active or veteran, are entitled to a military disability pension if they are injured during their time in the service.

The veterans policy that governs these benefits for the veterans was designed in close contact with our Veterans Platform, in which all veterans organisations are represented. Policy changes are only made after consulting this Platform. The Veterans Platform plays an essential role in all decisions regarding our veterans. Because we believe in working **with** one another, not **against** each other.

Central to executing our three-pillar-policy is our Veterans Institute, a unique collaboration of professionals, scientists and health-care specialists. We have our own military hospital and a military rehabilitation centre which provides excellent, customised care. At any time, a veteran can walk into our Veterans Institute and ask for help.

Whether it be psychological help, health care, meetings with other veterans, information or even being admitted into our home for elderly veterans. And it's important to state here, that at our ministry boasts an independent Inspector of Veterans Affairs. This Inspector is entitled to investigate complaints and advise on his findings directly to the minister and me.

As token of our appreciation, all soldiers are awarded a medal for their missions. Veterans receive a special Veteran's Insignia. We also decorate the wounded. Not

just the physically wounded. But also the psychologically wounded. The Ministry of Defence recently erected a special monument to the memory of all soldiers who have fallen in peace operations.

All veterans receive a special pass which gives them benefits like a free veteran's magazine, free train tickets to veteran events, invitations to reunions and discounts on military books, movies and music. Our veterans receive these benefits and this special attention until the day they die.

Our veterans have many stories to tell. Whether it's that Dutch paratrooper that helped liberate Nijmegen at Operation Market Garden in 1944, or the 21-year old corporal who helped build a new bridge in the Afghan province of Uruzgan just a year ago. Their stories have one thing in common: that peace is not easily won. That peace is not easily kept. We need to tell this story. So people don't forget. We cannot forget. We must not forget.

At the Ministry of Defence, we strongly feel the responsibility to support our veterans in telling this story.

To other citizens. To the next generation. So that we **do** learn from history. We send veterans to schools to educate schoolchildren. Next year, a schoolbook about veterans will be published. And every year, we run a special Veterans Campaign in the mass media.

To the outside world, we pursue a transparent policy. We take on embedded journalists and are as open as possible about our actions. These actions pay off. For example, compared to the situation seven years ago, the appreciation of our Lebanon veterans whose missions took place as far back as the nineteen-seventies has risen with 15 percent. This recognition reflects not only on our veterans, but also on our active soldiers and the Dutch Armed Forces as a whole.

For Dutch society today, showing this acknowledgement, appreciation and care is self-evident. It's hard to believe that this policy dates back only two decades. We in Holland have come a long way. From the days when soldiers like Joop Bouma came back from the Dutch Indies and nobody talked about it. To the days of a Dutch Veterans Day and a serious veteran's policy which we are now taking steps to

consolidate and improve by additional veteran legislation. To make sure that no government can easily cut back on the privileges gained from a process of over 50 years of learning to value the efforts of veterans.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We all hope that, one day, war will no longer be necessary to settle conflict. It's in the hands of governments. It's in the hands of every one of us walking the Earth. Here, in Copenhagen, I see veterans who were once enemies, sitting at the same table, striving for the same goals.

Some of you may come from a time when 'peacekeeping mission' was not a phrase in your vocabulary. But today, you are all showing us the true colours of veterans of the 21st century. Able to fight when necessary. Able to reconcile and reconstruct when possible.

I hear your message. And, in my role as a politician, I am more than committed to join you in this important task.

Thank you.

-0-0-0-