

Peacekeepers in a Warlike Situation: The Dutch Experience

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Introduction

The title of this contribution refers, above all, to the Dutch experiences during one event in particular: the tragic fall of the muslim enclave and UN 'safe area' Srebrenica to the Bosnian-Serb forces of general Mladic in July 1995. The fall of Srebrenica - a turning point with regard to the international involvement in the Balkans - has been a major recent influence in the development of the Dutch participation in peace-support operations. It is very much a case of 'before' and 'after' Srebrenica. Or, with reference to the title of this symposium, very much a case of 'illusion' and 'reality'. I will deal with the fall of Srebrenica in July 1995 and its effects on Dutch public opinion, on the Dutch way of thinking about peace-support operations in general and on the Dutch Army in particular in the second half of this address. These effects have been far-reaching in some respects but much less so in others. But first allow me - in order to put things into perspective - to make some comments on the historic background of the Dutch participation in peace-support operations.

Dutch peace-support operations during the Cold War

During the Cold War period the Netherlands were, with regard to peace-support operations, 'willing but unable'. On the one hand, successive Dutch governments stressed that they wanted to belong to what has become known as 'Dag Hammarskjold's constituency'. There were several reasons for this Dutch support for the United Nations, especially in its peace-supporting role. International law had always been an important element of Dutch foreign policy. In fact, the Dutch constitution expressly mentions the promotion of the international rule of law and of human rights. This task is bestowed upon the government. The second reason for the active support given to the United Nations during the Cold War era was more practical. This active membership of the UN could also be exploited as a tool of foreign policy. The Netherlands considered themselves to be in the league of the 'middle powers', or at least of the 'smaller middle powers'. In fact, shortly after the end of the Second World War, the Netherlands' government, together with e.g. Canada, claimed a 'special position' in the UN, somewhere between the 'really' small nations (Denmark was often used as an example) and the major powers. And thirdly, by being an active member of the UN, the Dutch hoped to improve their standing

and reputation among the many newly emerging Third World countries. The Dutch image in the Third World, or so it was felt, had been damaged by its colonial past, especially with regard to the difficult, laborious and - according to many - humiliating decolonization-process of the Dutch Indies (which started immediately after the war) and later on in New Guinee (1958-1962).

These were three clear reasons for a positive stance towards the UN and its peace-support initiatives. What remained, was to give this support of the UN real military content. The opportunity presented itself when Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjold initiated his initiative for stand-by peacekeeping forces in 1959. Until then the Dutch had only participated in smaller observer missions, like UNTSO in the Middle-East. The total number of Dutch observers till 1960 only comprised about 200, most of these officers taking part in the comparatively calm UNTSO-operation. But now, in response to the request for peacekeeping forces by Secretary-General Hammarskjold, the Dutch Foreign Minister Joseph Luns (who was later to rise to the post of secretary-general of NATO) rather emphatically offered military units for UN stand-by duty. These offers, made in 1963, 1965 and 1968 respectively, were by all means impressive: a mechanized infantry battalion, a medical unit, six hundred marines, helicopters, cargo aircraft, warships - including an aircraft carrier - and officers for staff duties were made available. Probably most surprised by this offer was the Dutch military establishment. They read about the intentions of Foreign Minister Luns in the morning newspaper. This explains why the newly instituted crisis-management staff of the Dutch Army was given the name ' Staf Ochtendblad', or 'Morning Paper Staff'.

I have already characterized the Dutch attitude towards peace-support operations in the Cold War era as 'willing but unable'. 'Willing' we were: one only has to look at the impressive offer I just mentioned of nearly 2000 stand-by soldiers and the wide array of ships and aircraft. 'Unable' was its companion. Secretary-General U Thant, who succeeded Dag Hammarskjold after his tragic death in Congo, accepted the Dutch offer of stand-by forces with gratitude. This, however, was all he was willing to do. His message was, and I quote: 'I have been in no position to do much more than this'. The fact that the Netherlands was not asked for the new peacekeeping operation in Cyprus (UNFICYP) in 1964 was significant. Foreign Minister Luns was a formal and usually polite man. His real response to the cautious or even declining reaction of Secretary-General U Thant to the Dutch stand-by offer has not been recorded. But Minister Luns must have been disappointed. After all, his offer to supply stand-by forces had been substantial and well-motivated. The UN Secretariat never really explained this refusal to rely on Dutch peacekeepers, except for smaller and less sensitive observer missions and disaster relief operations. Perhaps the Secretariat felt that the Dutch had indeed been infected by their colonial past and that, therefore, the new states from the Third World would raise objections. Perhaps the loyal Dutch membership of NATO meant that we would be brandished as a party to the Cold War. Whatever the reason,

the Netherlands was not asked to participate in a major UN-operation until the end of the seventies.

All this suited the Dutch military establishment fine. The Dutch military approached peace-support operations as a burden that only distracted from the real *raison d'être* of the Dutch armed forces, i.e. stopping the Red Army on the plains of Northern Germany. The Dutch Army Staff stressed that the Army was already low on manpower and equipment and that sending a UN-battalion abroad would seriously disrupt the NATO-strategy of forward defence in Germany. After all, deploying a single battalion for over six months on UN-duty implied dismantling a whole brigade for training and replacement. What emerged in the sixties and seventies was a bureaucratic fight between the Dutch Foreign Office - a willing supporter of the concept of UN peace-support missions - and the Dutch military establishment, which was soon actively trying to render harmless the stand-by offer of Minister Luns as quickly as possible. And it has to be said, the military were quite successful. At the end of the seventies very little reminded us of the ambitious stand-by offer made in the sixties. The entire UN-training program for the Dutch stand-by battalion (the back-bone of the Dutch offer) consisted of an impressive eight classroom hours, mainly dedicated to a documentary and some basic information about the UN.

This was the situation in 1979, when the UN-Secretariat - quite unexpectedly - called upon the Netherlands to participate in the peacekeeping mission in the Lebanon (UNIFIL), which had become operational one year before. The Dutch government agreed, much to the liking of the Foreign Ministry and much to the dismay of a surprised Dutch Army. UNIFIL was a troublesome peacekeeping operation from the start. All in all, over a period of six years, more than 8000 Dutch peacekeepers would be needed for this mission. This personnel mainly belonged to the mechanized UN-battalion which had been dedicated for stand-by duty in the sixties. In 1979 it was understaffed, undermanned and hardly trained for UN duty. Now the battalion had six weeks to prepare for 'the real thing'. Only a single company from the battalion was actually ready for deployment when the UN-Secretariat put out its first feelers. This sorry state of affairs - at least from the point of view of the Foreign Ministry - was the result of the complicated conscription and manning system of that time. One company from the battalion was combat ready, one was in training, the other two companies were on leave.

Problems accumulated. NATO raised objections, albeit in polite diplomatic language. The Dutch battalion would have to be withdrawn from front-line duty in Germany. From an operational point of view, the unit would be demoted from 'A-1' to 'A-4' status. Leading NATO-generals made it quite clear that they were not very pleased with NATO-defences being weakened because the Dutch wanted to be such active UN-supporters. There was also the problem of sending Dutch conscripts abroad, possibly even against their own free will. For earlier missions, we had been able to make do with sending volunteers. This even worked for the peace-enforcement mission in Korea from 1950 to 1954. The Netherlands provided an all-volunteer infantry battalion (some 4000 men

over a four-year period) and one warship, which patrolled the Korean coastal waters. As I have already indicated, the Dutch contribution to UN peace-support missions during the Cold War period was a great deal less problematic. These were much smaller operations, involving limited numbers of observers and specialists (like the small medical detachment that served in the Congo in 1960-1963 as part of the UNOC-operation).

Manning UNIFIL, on the contrary, was a challenge of a different magnitude. There were social and political complications. A significant number of Dutch conscripts had volunteered for the stand-by mechanized UN battalion mainly for practical and personal reasons: the barracks of the battalion were close to their own homes, which meant that they could go home at night. Most volunteers had not counted on actually being deployed on UN-peacekeeping service. After all, wasn't it highly unlikely that the Dutch Army would ever be asked for this? A number of parents now aired their concern in public. Why were these young and badly trained conscripts -'straight from mother's lap' - being sent to a far away country to die for people and political groups of whom we knew little? Several so-called 'committees of worried parents' were organized. The unions for conscript military personnel (these unions were a typical phenomenon of the democratization that had swept through the army during the sixties, and included phenomena like the right not to cut one's hair, the right to demonstrate for higher pay and the right not to salute officers) claimed that the legal foundations for sending conscripts abroad against their free will were weak. The unions even brought their case before the Supreme Court and forced the government to adopt new legislation in this respect. The Dutch government however, conforming to what appeared to be the mainstream of public opinion, emphasized that voluntary service would always have priority. All in all, only 120 conscripts were sent to the Middle-East against their free will, out of a total of over 8000 peacekeepers.

In 1985 the Netherlands withdrew from UNIFIL, claiming that - especially after the Israeli invasion of 1982 (Operation Peace for Galilee) - this mission no longer served a real political or practical purpose. The UNIFIL-operation did however create an important legacy with regard to the matter of sending conscripts abroad. After 1985, the Dutch government stuck to what has become known as 'the aircraft steps clause': conscripts who had volunteered for UN-service could change their minds till the very last minute, even while boarding the aircraft, so to speak, without any repercussions. The UNIFIL-operation made one other thing clear as well. As long as the Dutch government maintained conscription, it was going to be difficult to find enough peacekeepers for any large-scale UN-operation. And it had also become clear that the Dutch military establishment simply was not interested in peacekeeping missions. NATO would always come first.

Dutch peace-support operations since 1989

The big turn-around came with the end of the Cold War. The most important Dutch document in this respect was the Defence White Paper of 1993, better known as the 'Defence Priorities Review'. If anyone in the Dutch defence organisation wanted to add some spice to a slow conversation, he only needed to mention the words 'Defence Priorities Review'. He would be assured of his listeners' undivided attention. The 'Priorities Review' was indeed a radical document. In fact, it introduced the largest reorganization of the Dutch armed forces since the Second World War. The new-style Royal Dutch Army was to be much smaller. In fact, it was to lose over half its strength in personnel. Also, after 175 years, conscription was abolished. The new Dutch army was to consist entirely of volunteers, most of these signing contracts for two and a half years of service.

This much reduced, all-volunteer army was to be deployed mainly for peace-support, humanitarian and disaster-relief operations. These operations were in fact given equal status to 'traditional' national defence tasks and the contribution to NATO. Essentially, all active Dutch units and individual military personnel must be available for this end. As far as peace-support operations were concerned, the Netherlands Army now had to be able to deploy individual officers as observers and monitors, as well as three battalion-size units for a maximum period of three years. Or the Army had to be able to deploy one brigade-size unit for a maximum of one year within the framework of a peace-enforcement operation. The statistics soon started to speak for themselves. Over the past seven years the Dutch armed forces have become involved in nearly thirty peace-support, humanitarian and disaster-relief operations. This is double the total number of similar operations during the preceding 45 Cold War years. On average, 1500 to 2000 Dutch personnel serve abroad at any given moment, mainly in the former Yugoslavia. To put these figures into perspective: during the past years, the reorganized Dutch Army has deployed about 10 percent of its active strength on peace-support operations. In this respect, the - basically sound - idea of deploying 'tailor-made units' has complicated matters substantially. For instance, one of the Dutch IFOR-engineer companies was composed of personnel from 17 different units!

The speed at which this political turnabout took place in 1993 is remarkable. Why remarkable? Only two years before, in 1991, the Dutch government had stated that getting rid of conscription was neither desirable nor feasible for some time to come. Moreover, the Dutch social-democratic party, a strong political force in the Netherlands - and in fact the party to which the then Minister of Defence belonged - had always stressed the importance of maintaining conscription, if only for the sake of the interaction and close relationship between society and the armed forces. And so, all these apparently immutable positions went overboard only two years later, in 1993.

Why then did the Netherlands government so unexpectedly abolish conscription, a system which had proven itself for nearly two centuries?

Apparently, strong political forces had been at work, forces that rode on the dramatic international events as they developed after the end of the Cold War. The military establishment warned against getting rid of conscription. But this is not where the main line of defence against government intentions lay. These were the days of large cut-backs in defence budgets and of the survival of the most willing branch of the armed forces. For the Army, Navy and Air Force there was very little to choose but to focus on peace-support operations. In other words, peace-support operations had now become an instrument of institutional survival. Resistance to the new defence priorities would surely have backfired, especially from a budgetary point of view. The Dutch government felt that resistance against its new defence priorities (including doing away with conscription) would come from a different angle, i.e. from within society - and from parliament, for that matter. Would the Dutch population be willing to make the necessary ultimate sacrifice? The Gulf War and the developing crisis in former Yugoslavia especially stirred up the debate. These new world-wide peace-support commitments were by no means risk-free. And if our country really wanted to contribute troops in larger numbers, the 'aircraft steps clause' would have to go. In many ways, this was UNIFIL revisited, but on a larger scale.

The government decided that the answer to all these questions was to switch over to a small, flexible all-volunteer army. From both a historical and an ideological point of view, this was an enormous step. After all, an important argument in favour of maintaining conscription had always been that it guaranteed the close relationship between society and the armed forces. Moreover, for over a century and a half the Netherlands had had no experience in the large scale recruitment of professional soldiers. The armed forces now had to launch themselves onto the restricted and competitive labour market. The Dutch Army had to present itself as an attractive employer. Television and radio commercials (mainly along the lines of 'working for peace and security, all over the world') were used to attract new soldiers.

The process of restructuring the Dutch armed forces, which started with the Priorities Review of 1993, is now in its final stage. However, in these past five years the operations in the former Yugoslavia have taken center stage. In fact, there has been remarkably little debate about the transition to a smaller, all-volunteer army itself. Attention seems to be focussed much more on the actual deployment and events abroad. The main Dutch contributions to the UNPROFOR-operation were a Signals Battalion, a Transport/Logistics Battalion and an Air-Landing Infantry Battalion ('red berets'), the last of which was deployed to the 'safe area' Srebrenica in early 1994. There were strong doubts about the feasibility and effectiveness of UNPROFOR, but the political arguments in favour of muddling through kept the upper hand over the sound military arguments in favour of withdrawing. The fact that six Dutch soldiers lost their lives whilst serving in UNPROFOR had little impact on the debate on whether or not the Dutch should continue to take part in the UN-operations in the Balkans.

'The book on Srebrenica cannot be closed'

Obviously, the tragic events in Srebrenica turned out to be the major landmark. The enclave was overrun by Bosnian-Serb forces on 11 and 12 July 1995. The political developments that followed in the Netherlands are a pristine example of how to deal - or not to deal - with a crisis of this magnitude, sensitivity and complexity. At first, a general sense of relief prevailed in the Netherlands. The Dutch infantry battalion, which had been tasked to protect the UN 'safe area', suffered one casualty, and this at the hands of a frightened muslim militiaman who had tried to prevent the withdrawal of a Dutch armoured personnel carrier from an observation post towards the battalion headquarters. Many in our country felt, however, that the cost in Dutch lives could have been much higher. But within days, this feeling of relief was replaced by one of public anger, especially when evidence began to surface that thousands of muslim men from the enclave had been massacred. The press and members of parliament began to ask tough and sometimes nasty questions. Nearly every day, new and damaging bits of evidence about the Bosnian-Serb massacres and the alleged 'passivity' or even 'cowardness' of the Dutch UN-soldiers kept popping up.

In reponse to pressure from parliament and public opinion, the Dutch Minister of Defence and the Commander-in-Chief of the Netherlands Army established a Committee of Enquiry. This committee consisted entirely of military personnel, taken from the Military Police and the intelligence and operations branches. The committee started its activities about a month after the return of the Dutch battalion from Bosnia. Each individual member of the battalion, all Dutch military observers involved and liaison-officers and Dutch officers from the UN-staffs in Zagreb and Sarajevo were debriefed. The Military History Section provided historical background information to the debriefing teams and identified issues which could become highly 'flammable' in the public debate. However, the Commander-in-Chief agreed that his historical branch could in no way be responsible for, or committed to, the contents of this Srebrenica debriefing report.

The committee-report was published in October 1995.¹ It was, undoubtedly, an impressive piece of work, especially if one takes into account the complexity of the project (over 450 individuals had to be interviewed) and the short time-span allowed. But the report also left many delicate questions unanswered. New details kept emerging in the press. New questions were being asked (or asked again): Should the Dutch battalion not have done more to protect the civilian population of Srebrenica? Did the fact that the battalion-commander agreed to the evacuation of the women, children and old people of Srebrenica not amount to approving ethnic cleansing? Why did the unit not use its heavier weapons, like mortars and anti-tank guided missiles? Why did the battalion commander

1 *Rapport gebaseerd op de debriefing Srebrenica* (Report based on the debriefing Srebrenica) (Assen, 1995).

decide to introduce a limit on the amount of medical supplies (the so-called 'iron stocks') to be issued to the population, claiming that he might still need these medical supplies in case more Dutch soldiers were wounded? Perhaps the whole issue is best expressed in a new expression that was added to the Dutch language: 'het Karremans-gevoel' ('the Karremans-feeling'), after the name of the commander of the Dutch battalion in Srebrenica, lieutenant-colonel Karremans. This 'Karremans-feeling' expresses both helplessness and passivity.

Several books have now been published about the terrible events in Srebrenica in July 1995. In his autobiography *My years in command*, the Dutch Commander-in-Chief, lieutenant-general Hans Couzy, put the blame mainly on the United Nations and its lack of clear guidance and strong decisions.² In general Couzy's opinion, turning Srebrenica into a 'safe area' had been a 'mission impossible' from the very beginning. In just over a year, the Dutch political scientists Jan-Willem Honig and Norbert Both (a former research assistant to Lord David Owen) wrote *Srebrenica. Record of a War Crime*.³ Honig and Both dismissed the conspiracy theory and rumours of French interference. The blame went to the international community (and to the United Nations, the United States and the Netherlands in particular), as well as to the muslim government of president Izetbegovic. According to Honig and Both there was little the Dutch battalion could have done to prevent the Srebrenica massacre. This conclusion was challenged by professor Van Staden, the director of the Dutch Institute for International Affairs in The Hague.⁴ Van Staden claimed that the Dutch soldiers had suffered from the Stockholm-syndrom, i.e. they had unwillingly identified themselves with the Bosnian-Serbs who had, for all purposes, taken the Dutch battalion hostage.

After the generals and scientists, the journalists took over the playing field. For research-journalists especially, Srebrenica was indeed a thrilling story. Dutch journalists Frank Westerman and Bart Rijs published *Srebrenica. The Blackest Scenario*, an emotional and biting accusation, which centered around a conspiracy ('a gentlemen's agreement') between generals Ratko Mladic and UN-commander Bernard Janvier.⁵ When *The Blackest Scenario* was published, two years after the fall of Srebrenica, it appeared that little could still be added to what had already become known. The sources were beginning to dry out. This became evident in David Rohde's *A Safe Area. Srebrenica: Europe's worst massacre since the Second World War*. This book was very well written (it won Rohde the prestigious Pulitzer Prize for international reporting), parts of it may

2 H.A. Couzy, *Mijn jaren als bevelhebber* (My years in command) (Amsterdam/Antwerp, 1996).

3 J.W. Honig and Norbert Both, *Srebrenica. Reconstructie van een oorlogsmisdaad* (English edition in Penguin Books: *Srebrenica. Record of a war crime*) (Utrecht, 1996).

4 A. van Staden, *Defuik van Srebrenica. Een bijdrage aan nadere oordeelsvorming* (The trap of Srebrenica. A contribution to further judgement) (The Hague, 1997).

5 F. Westerman and B. Rijs, *Srebrenica. Het zwartste scenario* (Srebrenica. The blackest scenario) (Amsterdam/Antwerp, 1997).

even be called a personal document. But it was also, in many ways, a fragmentary book, spreading responsibility across everyone and every organisation involved.⁶ Finally, the battalion itself responded in *Dutchbat. For the Sake of Peace*.⁷ The tone of this book is sharp and frustrated, lashing out against 'those little people who haven't been there', like journalists and politicians. I guess that this book showed how deep the scars really were. From a personal point of view, I would like to add that at times I have been struck with the ease with which scientists and journalists alike have put forward 'new' facts (which often turned out to be old ones). Also, I have often found the ease with which certain far-reaching statements were made quite surprising. Two examples will suffice. David Rohde, for instance, claims that there would not have been a massacre in Srebrenica, if only the United Nations had approved close air support against the Bosnian-Serbs. Secondly, Rohde and Westerman/Rijs draw opposite conclusions from a 'deep throat'-like source, i.e. a United Nations officer who was present during the secret talks between generals Mladic and Janvier.

The legacy of Srebrenica

Allow me to return to the political ramifications of Srebrenica in the Netherlands. It soon became clear that the committee-report of October 1995 would not close 'the book on Srebrenica'. It was mainly politicians and journalists who refused to close this book, by the way. Public opinion polls had by now shown that the dramatic events in Srebrenica had not ended Dutch public support for the participation in peace-support operations. On the contrary: at the end of 1995, only a few months after the fall of Srebrenica, the old level of public support for peace-support operations was equalled. In the months that followed, this public support even increased a little more! Apparently, the Dutch have become more aware of the realities (both possibilities and limits) of this type of military operations.

Still, the quest for political responsibility for the 'Srebrenica-failure' continued. Dutch members of parliament called for an independent international investigation. The Dutch government made inquiries in Paris, London, Washington and New York: would France, Britain, the United States and the Secretariat of the United Nations perhaps be willing to take part in this investigation, or at least be willing to produce the necessary documents and make available for questioning key players in the Srebrenica story? As was to be expected, the answer was polite but negative. The hard-pressed Dutch Minister of Defence and his colleagues in the cabinet then decided to institute a new, even more thorough investigation of the events in Srebrenica. This task was given to the Dutch State Institute for War Documentation in Amsterdam.

6 D. Rohde, *A safe area. Srebrenica: Europe's worst massacre since the Second World War* (London, 1997).

7 *Dutchbat, in vredesnaam: januari 1995-juli 1995* (Dutchbat, for the sake of peace: January 1995-July 1995) (Rijswijk, 1996).

The institute was started shortly after the Second World War to document the history and the experiences of the Dutch under German occupation. It holds a good reputation for independent and scholarly research. The investigation is currently still in the first phase. It is expected that the first results will become public in two or three years. There is a general agreement between the government, parliament and the armed forces that, until the findings are published, 'Srebrenica' will not be put on the political agenda.

And so, from a political and scientific point of view, the Dutch authorities appear to have the Srebrenica-affair 'covered'. But obviously things are not quite as simple as this. The events of July 1995 in and around Srebrenica carry all the classic elements of guilt and penance: a perpetrator that is easy to identify (the Bosnian-Serbs), an obvious victim (the population of Srebrenica) and a witness (Dutchbat). In many ways too, Srebrenica was 'our' (i.e. Dutch) humiliation. It had strong political repercussions (although it did not lead to the resignation of the Minister of defence) and brought up for discussion the very fundamentals of the new Dutch defence policies, with their strong reliance on peace-support operations!

There are two other consequences of Srebrenica that I would like to mention in particular. Firstly, the transition from UNPROFOR to IFOR/SFOR has been well received by the Dutch military. In many ways, this change-over to a 'green' peace-enforcement operation has widened the gap - from a psychological point of view as well - with the 'blue' and powerless operation in Srebrenica. This has caused a sense of relief. The Dutch Army is capable of executing a successful peace-support operation, if only given the right mandate and the right tools. Secondly, the tragedy of Srebrenica and the feeling of helplessness has strengthened the call for clear political and military criteria for taking part in new peace-support operations. The Dutch Minister of Defence has stated that the United Nations is incapable of organizing and leading large-scale peace-support operations. The new Dutch criteria (introduced last year) dictate that, from now on, the Dutch armed forces will only take part in peace-support operations that comply with Dutch national interests and are led by the United States, Great-Britain or - if need be - France.

For the time being, 'Srebrenica' will continue to frustrate the desire of both the Dutch government and the military establishment for peace and quiet on the peace-support and organizational front. The reorganization of the Dutch armed forces is nearing the end and the Dutch contribution to the SFOR-operation is continuing without too many hiccups (although its future is still unclear). In one or two years however the political ghost of Srebrenica will appear once more, when the 'final' report of the State Institute for War Documentation is published. It will of course be interesting to see what its findings and - above all - the political impact of the report will be. If you invite me back in two or three years, I should be able to add the final paragraph to this, as yet, unfinished account of what has become known as the legacy of Srebrenica, a focal point of illusion and reality in peace operations.