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Books and Bikes. Noises and Voices of Veterans

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Books and bikes. Noises and voices of veterans

Esmeralda Kleinreesink, René Moelker en Rudy Richardson

Introduction

There are lots of differences in the way veterans share their stories. Some veterans keep quiet and seldom talk about past experiences from conflict zones. Others are hard to stop when they have commenced their 'battle' stories and relentlessly repeat them to the same group of people, family, friends or colleagues. These are the stories in the genre 'Grandpa is revisiting Balikpapan in Indonesia again'. The stories also differ regarding the audience the narrators are addressing. While some only seek the intimate audience of friends and family, others broadcast their life events to larger audiences, producing egodocuments and near literature, or they address political issues trying to reach goals ameliorating veterans' rights and claims.

Psychology teaches us that a very good way to study life stories is to look at their integrative function in life (McAdams, 1996). The integrative function of storytelling, the coherence it offers, is relevant to the construction of an identity, to psychic health, to adaptation of veterans to civilian life after being 'out there' and to the political interest of veterans being served by the stories. Therefore, more insight and knowledge into the process of narrating enhances our understanding of the expressive side of veterans. Reason enough to study life stories.

In this chapter we will study two groups of veterans who have different ways of broadcasting their stories. First, we will study the soldier-authors of conflict memoirs, especially those concerning the conflict in Afghanistan. Second, we will look at veterans on motorcycles, who by riding express their story and commemorate their fallen buddies. The question being addressed concerns the content of their narratives: 'What is it the veterans are telling us?'

These narratives were collected from two different sources. The first source is the book *Task Force Uruzgan* in which soldiers were asked to write down their story. The editor, Noël van Bommel, was told by many of the soldier-authors that they participate because 'they felt that their unit deserved more recognition. According to them, the Dutch public is ill-informed about what really happens in Afghanistan'. He also suggests another motive for soldiers to write about their experiences: 'The writing project sometimes seemed to fulfill a therapeutic role' (Bommel, 2010).

Veterans on motorcycles usually are not of the writing kind. Their stories are within the oral tradition. Their life stories were written down by René Moelker and Michelle Schut (2011) who interviewed over thirty bikers and published twenty-one stories in the book *Brothers in Arms, Brothers on Bikes*. Here, the therapeutic aspect is found in riding the motorcycle in a group that is heading towards an almost sacred destination: a memorial site, a pilgrimage town like Lourdes or a rally of brothers in arms.

The theoretical concept of the narrative

The psychologist McAdams (1996) explains how narratives help construct coherent identities. It is the 'I' that constructs a 'Me' by telling stories that relate to the self. The process of creating and telling these self-stories therefore is coined 'selfing' by McAdams. Selfing is the narrating process to create a modern self.

It is mainly through the psychosocial construction of life stories that modern adults create identity in the Me. Life stories may be examined in terms of their structure and content, function, development, individual differences, and relation to mental health and psychosocial adaptation. (McAdams, 1996: 295)

Then what the life story really does is that it integrates the narration of self into a coherent whole.

By binding together disparate elements within the Me into a broader narrative frame, the selfing process can make a patterned identity out of what may appear at first blush to be a random and scattered life. (McAdams, 1996: 309)

In psychology Sarin (1986) suggests that the narrative 'may be a new "root metaphor" for psychology as a whole' and Polkinghorne (1988) even places the narrative at the center of understanding human lives.

Our lives are ceaselessly intertwined with narrative, with the stories we tell and hear told, with the stories that we dream or imagine or would like to tell. All these stories are reworked in the stories of our own live that we narrate to ourselves in an episodic, sometimes semiconscious, virtually uninterrupted monologue. (Polkinghorne, 1988: 160)

Sometimes a narrative does not work anymore and therefore it needs to be rewritten. A psychologist can assist in reconstructing these life stories. The criterion of truth simply comes down to the narrative being a 'good story', comprising strong characters, a good and convincing story line and a plot, as well as an ending. 'At least six standards of good life-stories may be identified: (a) coherence, (b) openness, (c) credibility, (d) differentiation, (e) reconciliation, and (f) generative integration. (McAdams, 1996: 315). In generative integration fault lines in the Me are reconciled and integrated. Differentiation in the stories arises from the main character growing older and acquiring more events.

Method

In the United States of America, a short story project for soldiers resulted in a bestselling anthology called 'Operation Homecoming' and in an Oscar nominated documentary with the same title.

In the Netherlands, inspired by the American example, a leading Dutch newspaper, *de Volkskrant*, embarked on a similar project encouraging soldiers who had recently returned from a tour in Afghanistan to write about their experiences. This project, fully supported by the Ministry of Defense, resulted in a book called *Task Force Uruzgan* (Bemmel, 2010) which reached non-fiction bestseller status and comprised twenty-nine chapters. During our research we, firstly, looked at the events these soldiers write about in this book. What narratives do they find important to share with the public at large?

Task Force Uruzgan can be considered non-obtrusive material: material that the researchers cannot influence. The texts are what they are without intrusion of the researcher.

An advantage of non-obtrusiveness is that bias does not stem from the interaction of the respondent and the researcher. That doesn't mean however that the stories in this book are uninfluenced by people other than their authors. The soldiers-authors in this book were actively recruited by the editors via articles in Dutch military journals such as the *Defensiekrant* and also during road trips to units that had recently returned from Afghanistan. The recruited soldiers were invited to spend a day in a 'literary training camp' where they were taught the basics of writing a good story and were personally coached in developing the outline of a one-issue-story. The story itself was written at home and was commented upon and edited by both a journalist and a professional writer, who thereby have had some influence on the content of the stories.

We also looked, secondly, at interviews with veterans who form motorcycle clubs. These interviews can be considered obtrusive material, as the interview protocol guided the respondent into certain topical areas. These veterans on bikes are characterized by high mobility and transformation, the apotheosis of their existence being the road trip towards some destination, albeit profane (rallies, runs) or sacred (memorials, pilgrimages). This mobility, the vulnerability of these groups because of possible past experiences and the common feeling they share of being rejected by wider society as both a veteran and a biker. This makes it difficult to win their trust other than by partly participating in their life style and engaging in observation using ethnographic methods. The characteristics of the veteran-bikers, the tensions and the mobility of groups that are defined by membership and closure towards 'normal' citizens and the non-veteran-biker community, i.e. those 'who would not understand', requires kinetic ethnography as a method¹. By kinetic ethnography, which we define as a form of participant observation on the move, a new research tool is brought to the fore: the motorcycle. The researchers joined an international rally, *The Brothers in Arms Run* in the Dutch city of Groningen and two motorcycle pilgrimages, one to Lourdes, France and one called *Run for the Wall* heading towards The Wall in Washington D.C. Besides this participant methodology, *camp fire interviews* were conducted. These were sometimes short, sometimes lengthy interviews in odd places like parking lots, restaurants and campsites. In total, some twenty-one chapters comprising narratives were published in the book *Brothers in Arms, Brothers on Bikes* (Moelker and Schut, 2011). The content of these narratives was analyzed in the same manner as the narratives taken from the before mentioned book *Task Force Uruzgan* (Bemmel, 2010).

In this study we used the descriptive coding technique from Miles and Huberman (1994) to analyze the texts. Because the narratives were published in book format and the electronic versions were available to the researchers, this coding technique could be applied to these texts. We used a pre-specified coding list called the 'Military Event List', constructed by Vrijkotte et al (2010). This list involves eleven categories of events that can happen during a military mission, namely incidents, victims, special occasions, life conditions, home front, health, working conditions, leisure, job perception, interaction with colleges and interaction with external parties (Vrijkotte, et al., 2010). These categories were applied while close reading the books and the interviews. After coding the events, scatter plots were made to analyze the frequency of the different (groups of) categories in either the narratives of the soldier-authors and the interviews with the bikers. On the basis of these scatter plots, the most important results were described with some snappy illustrations. Below we'll start to show the results with the scatter plots and description from the soldier-authors.

¹ The term is adapted by Moelker and Schut (2011) from Edith Turner who coined the concept of kinetic rituals, 1978: xiii. The task of developing kinetic ethnography was undertaken earlier by Michalowski and Dubisch (2001) and Dubisch (2004; 2005) who based their work on Turner and Turner's (1978) studies of pilgrimage.

The soldier-authors

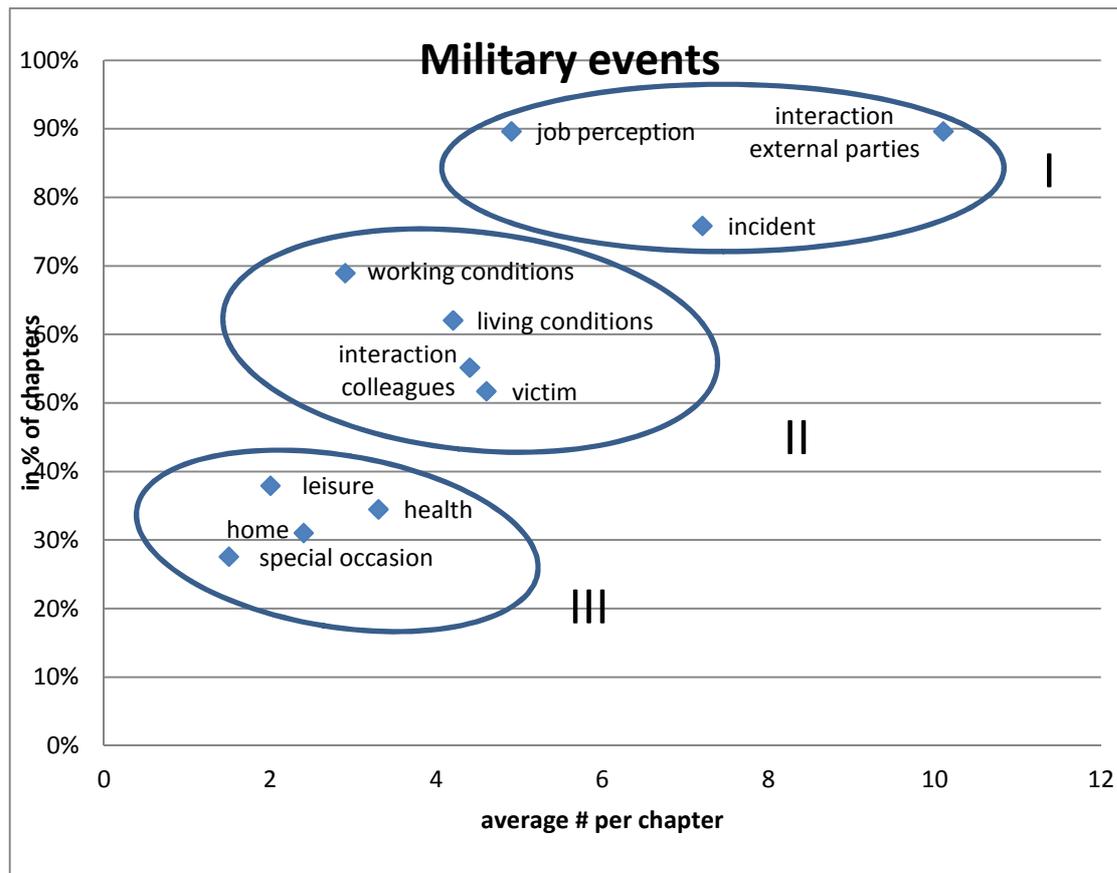


Figure 1 Military events mentioned in Task Force Uruzgan

Applying the categories of Vrijkotte et al. (2010) to the twenty-nine stories of the *Task Force Uruzgan* book, tells us that all of the eleven categories from this list are mentioned in the book. Some of them even in 90% of all stories. Figure 1 shows that we can discern three different clusters of events in descending order of importance for the writers:

- I. Work itself, a cluster that consists of the categories ‘Job perception’, ‘Incidents’ and ‘Interactions with external parties’;
- II. Working circumstances, comprising ‘Work and living conditions’, ‘Interactions with internal parties’ and ‘Victims’ ;
- III. Private time, which contains the categories ‘Leisure’, ‘Home front’, ‘Health’ and ‘Special occasions’.

Cluster I: work itself

The most important category is ‘interaction with external parties’. Almost all writers talk about their interaction with others than their direct colleagues. Most of what they describe has to do with interaction with Afghans: meeting and greeting Afghan people, their experiences with the Afghan climate, terrain and customs and working with Afghan military and police personnel and local government. Lieutenant-colonel Rietdijk writes about his arrival in a small village:

After another hour of Paris-Dakar-like circumstances in the back of an army pickup, we arrive in front of the large green door of Mohammed's house. Boys and girls run around us, smiling a lot and asking for pens. Since Operation Spin Ghar dislodged the Taliban from this area, the atmosphere in Chora has become pleasant.

Most of it is positive or neutrally formulated, but negative experiences are not withheld from the readers, such as this account of working with the Afghan police by colonel Van Griensven:

[...] the cooperation was successful (as far as possible in this country) and the checkpoints at the edge of the area were once again occupied. At least, most of the time, because they are rather lax in matters of attendance here and are obviously also occupied with other matters such as blackmailing people, harvesting poppy and being high.

The same can be concluded from what the soldier-authors write about their job perception. Of course they describe successful actions and operations, but they don't shy away from their own insecurities about the success of the actions, or their own behavior, and regularly even clearly mention the enemy's success. Captain Hamers was not amused when he read an Dutch intelligence report:

[I]n a report from Kamp Holland I have to read that about eight hundred to one thousand warriors have gathered around the Chora district. That is almost ten times more than I have! The report also indicates that the groups will attack from several sides. I think I'm going crazy. Why do I have to read this in a report, why wasn't I informed about this?

Even though the mission was sometimes referred to in the media and the political arena as a 'reconstruction mission' instead of a 'fighting mission', three-quarters of the authors mention being involved in some sort of shooting incident, varying from being shot at and firing back, having to seek shelter in a bunker, to having to give medical support to victims of violence. The first event, being involved in a shoot-out, is the incident most often mentioned.

This combination of much attention to interaction with the Afghans, combined with high levels of shooting incidents indicates that according to the soldier-authors it is too simple to state that a mission is either about fighting or about reconstruction. In the case of Afghanistan it is both, and the Dutch armed forces can and do fight as any other army. Three different authors describe that they feel they have participated in historic battles. Colonel Van Griensven concludes for example in his chapter on the battle for Chora:

The attack is successful and in the afternoon the Taliban have been dislodged and all posts have been recovered and occupied by ANA-soldiers. The second battle for Chora has been settled and Dutch (military) history has indeed been written.

Cluster II: working circumstances

The second most important cluster of categories that the soldier-authors in Task Force Uruzgan write about, is that which deals with working circumstances. It comprises four categories: working conditions, victims, living conditions and interaction with colleagues.

From the descriptions of circumstances it appears that working conditions in Afghanistan are tough. Casual remarks about the harsh climate (*It is god-awful hot*), operations in enemy territory (*The bullets impact the hard soil around them*) and the demanding physical circumstances are abundant:

We are what is called Light Infantry: flak jacket, optics, instruments, communication equipment, helmet and weapon combine easily to about sixty kilos per guy.

Being a soldiers also means that seeing victims, people who are wounded or even dead, is part of the working conditions. It is a part which is often mentioned.

The own Dutch victims who were killed are mentioned most often, which is logical, as they are part of what psychologists call the ‘in-group’ (see table 1 below). More surprising in this respect is that wounded victims in the local population are mentioned even more often than Dutch wounded personnel. This might be an indication that the faith of the Afghan people is considered very important by the Dutch soldier-authors. This also fits with the large attention given in the book to interactions with the Afghans.

	Wounded	Killed
1	Local (50%)	Dutch (36%)
2	Dutch (30%)	Local (28%)
3	Enemy (13%)	Coalition/ANA ² (19%)
4	Coalition/ANA (7%)	Enemy (17%)

Table 1 Background of victims as % of the total number of victims mentioned

Soldiers do not complain much about the living conditions, although from the stories it becomes clear that there are five things very important for soldiers in this respect: eating and drinking; smoking, sleeping; good sanitary facilities and clean clothes. They are casually mentioned time and time again:

*‘Cup of coffee and a fag?’ he asks.
‘Wonderful,’ I say and flop down on the floor.
‘Good morning, by the way.’*

The appreciation of direct colleagues and bosses is also very important. The writers of TFU predominantly talk about positive interactions with them and describe the traditional military camaraderie of laughing and crying together (mainly laughing, though) and typical bonding rituals, such as the use of the mascot in major Van Groenestein’s team:

Karelkie, the Tiger, our mascot is standing next to me. Ever since the mission in Bosnia, every member of a patrol team strokes Karelkie before he exits the gate.

Cluster III: private time

The cluster of categories that are mentioned least often, but even so in at least 20% of all stories, is comprised of events that are of a more private nature: leisure, health and thinking about the people at home.

² Afghan National Army

Most of the leisure time mentioned is filled with sports, an unsurprising pastime for soldiers. Another regular pastime, drinking, is forbidden in Afghanistan for Dutch military personnel, a fact that is mentioned by several authors, but is not by all considered problematic: *'And living without alcohol, I discovered in Kamp Holland, is not so bad at all.'*

Complaints about not being able to sleep well and about being tired ('health') are more numerous. Major Gorissen is trying to ignore the shooting outside, as he desperately needs to sleep:

But...we do have to sleep a little... as we have another four days yet to go!

What is completely missing is any mention of sexuality. The story of a lieutenant Silvy Toele whose boyfriend is coincidentally also placed in Kandahar is indicative, and at the same time the only story actually to acknowledge sexual longing:

I hardly dare kiss my boyfriend. It is a very awkward way of saying goodbye and it is completely ridiculous. But what if someone were to see us? What would they think?

More than a kiss and a hug are never exchanged between them.

One-third of the stories mention the home front of the writer, often denoting just that there was contact or that the writer thought about the people he or she had left at home. But as major Van Groenestein shows, the people at home are never far away:

I fall asleep with the picture of my family on my chest. A second specimen is behind the breast plate of my flak jacket and accompanies me during actions.

In short: the soldier-authors of *Task Force Uruzgan* are much more willing to share the work related military events, than their private experiences. This is even visible in the least mentioned category: special occasions, which are mostly comprised of descriptions of memorial services for deceased colleagues.

Brothers in Arms, Brothers on Bikes

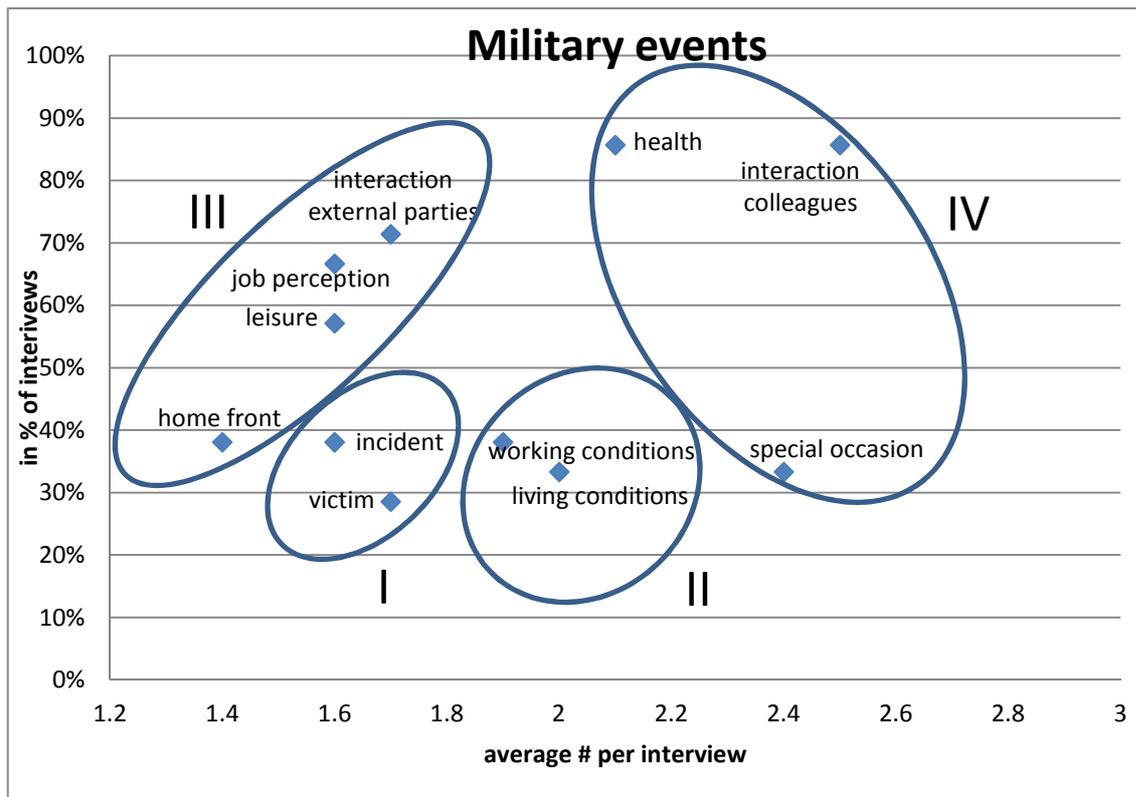


Figure 2: Military events mentioned in Brothers in Arms, Brothers on Bikes

The narratives of veterans on motorcycles were analyzed in the same manner as the narratives from the military authors. Twenty-one chapters of the book *Brothers in Arms, Brothers on Bikes* were studied using the same categories. Even though the method we used is the same, the narratives from the veterans on motorcycles are different from the soldier-authors for several reasons. First of all the time frame is different. The authors are dealing with their deployment itself, whilst the bikers reflect for the most part on the period after returning home. Secondly, the motorcyclists did not write themselves, but their narratives were constructed from interviews that specifically guided the respondents into talking about health and riding the motorcycle. The narratives illuminate a complementary dimension of the veteran phenomenon, displaying emotions and coping strategies by which the veterans manage to go on with their life after intense conflict experiences.

The categories of the Military Event List could be subsumed under four clusters.

- I. Battle stories, comprising the categories 'Incidents' and 'Victims'
- II. Conditions: 'Working conditions' and 'Living conditions'
- III. Professional and private live, containing the categories 'Job perception', 'Home front', 'Leisure' and 'Interaction with external parties'
- IV. Health and social support: 'Health', 'Special occasions' and 'Interaction with colleagues'

Cluster I: battle stories

All bikers witnessed the atrocities of intrastate violence or have, like Arie, the secretary of the Veterans MC, lost buddies. Some were themselves victims from incidents in the field. They do not all mention incidents or victims, because the interview protocol was not designed to specifically delve into this topic. Thus, firing incidents were mentioned only eleven times. Victims of violence were mentioned ten times. Sometimes the mandate did not allow intervention, as in the cases reported by veterans from Lebanon, Cambodia and former Yugoslavia, whilst in the case of Afghanistan the biker-veterans participated passionately in shoot-outs. The difference between the missions is significant and the emotions accompanying the experiences vary from being unable to act and feeling loss of autonomy to battle euphoria. Veterans from Lebanon tell they were under fire every day, an experience 'you get used to'. Fred, typically an individual rider in the category of the Rich Urban Bikers, is specific about his emotions:

The first time I got shot at, I will never forget. Neither will I forget the first victim, Siebe Boonstra, who died on the fourth of may, 1979 by friendly fire! It is my most sad memory.

One of the road captains of the Veterans MC drove his vehicle on a mine during his time in Yugoslavia and

suffered back injuries that took six months to recover. My buddy, present at the same incident, is still undergoing physical therapy. The incident did change me thoroughly, I now intent to enjoy life, including the small joys of life.

An embedded journalist, Vik, who in order to save his life participated in fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan, tells about his feelings of euphoria during action:

You live life to the fullest when you're engaged. Ninety per cent of the soldiers will never experience this kind of rush ... we were ambushed by 140 Taliban and ended the fight with 35 acknowledged kills. ...you realise 'I can be done for any moment' but like the soldiers, you have the skills and drills and then it is a good experience! Strangely, we actually laughed during the fight. You hear classic movie sounds and bullets fly straight through your hair.

Cluster II: conditions

The military profession and the biker life world resemble each other amongst others because of the underlying fascinations with technology and the physical aspect of machines. Motorcycling is impossible without getting your hands dirty. Being a professional soldier also implies that one needs to have boots on the ground and that hands will get dirty. An infantryman firing his weapon, experiences as mentioned the same kind of thrill as a biker going fast on curvy roads. All members of the military police that narrated their story only barely distinguish the thin line between working conditions controlling high ways or leisurely driving through the countryside. To them it is nearly the same. They enjoy speeding too when chasing rule violators. Or riding in formation in securing VIP's. They do rightly claim to drive more 'cutting edge' and disciplined than civilian bikers, but otherwise professional and private experiences are quite similar. There is a social aspect to the working conditions as well, as Burb, who flew Orions when they still were in service, remarks:

What I like about flying, I like about riding the motorcycle. In an Orion you go somewhere like the Middle East or Iceland, with about sixteen persons. The group thing is the same as in driving motorcycles: work hard, play hard.

The living conditions and life style of soldiers and bikers show remarkable similarity. The bikers reflect on this topic themselves fourteen times. In striving for distinction bikers wear collars and insignia just like soldiers wear their emblems. Symbolism is part of the life conditions. Being a biker is often a full time commitment. Kees mentions the difference between bikers and fashion riders. The latter would even ‘drive a lawn mower if that would be considered fashionable.’ Fred, marketing specialist and Rich Urban Biker, claims that riding runs in the family. His father, uncle and wife all are bikers. His wife is, like him, also committed to the cause of veterans and gave up her job to run a web-based enterprise called ‘veteranenshop.nl’.

Cluster III: professional and private live

Journalist Vik identified strongly with the Special Forces, he felt like a soldier-veteran himself, and wore his lieutenant star from his conscription days on his motor jacket. Physically he embodied his affiliation with the Special Forces by a tattoo, discretely hidden under his watch. He was verbally more capable of describing battle emotions. Vik describes that riding a motorcycle causes the same excitement in him, an excitement he needs because ‘*you never live as intense, as when close to death ...back in the Netherland I miss this feeling tremendously*’. So the military job perception shows a remarkable parallel with riding a motorcycle. These instances of parallel job and motorcycle perceptions were mentioned twenty-three times: ‘*the military and bikers alike seek dangerous situations ... the profession is never free from risk*’. The job perception is dominated by the awareness of being a risk manager. Soldiers and bikers always have to deal with risk. Bottom line is that both professional soldiers and bikers are ‘edge workers’ (Thompson, 1967: 19; 49; 243; 345; Lyng, 1990, 2005). Kees, a veteran from Yugoslavia and former president of the Federation of European Motorcyclists Association, adequately describes the feeling that stems from danger and risk in motorcycling:

It is hard to die in a car, safety precautions surround the automobile driver. [...] with a motorcycle you yourself are responsible for your life, you pull up the bike when the asphalt is nearing, and it feels good to have control and make decisions yourself. I am well aware of the danger and I do not seek it as I used too when I was young.

Even in dealing with the home front the military and biker community are much alike. During missions the soldiers are separated from their spouses and miss their home front. The bikers refer to the home front thirteen times in their narratives and mostly the issue again is separation. Some motor clubs do not accept female riders as members, but nonetheless all of them show their spouses respect. Stef, the president of the Veterans MC, one of the strictest clubs upholding the rule regarding the exclusion of female members, states:

We are very open and accessible. Supporters, bikers and all who are interested, are welcome. You need women to create a pleasant ambiance. For a soldier coming home from a mission, the home front and family life is all important, therefore it would not be a smart move to shut women out from our Friday night club meetings.

Twenty-six times the bikers referred to interactions with external parties. Often these interactions were related to lacking support, understanding and recognition from society. Wild Hog, who was quoted before, did not feel welcome upon his return from Lebanon:

We came back with a tan and were accused of playing the tourist. Back in the '80s a psychiatrist once said that we suffered from the Vietnam Syndrome. Not embraced by society. Some boys were killed by friendly fire, and the comments were, 'Hey, you shoot your own friend' and 'nice tan you got'. Nobody knew what really happened...

All veterans from Lebanon, Fred, Fire Lion and Wild Hog, who told their life story referred to this same incident regarding Siebe Boonstra. Even though they were not near the incident, it became a social stigma that stereotyped and shamed the whole group of Lebanon veterans. The same 'blaming and shaming' happened to members of Motorcycle group 'De Broekhoest' who were accused in the media of right wing sympathies after having served in the infamous and unfortunate Unprofor III mission (Srebrenica!). Even though acquitted, the slate was not easily wiped clean and the group as a group disbanded. Acceptance is growing however by social activism of the bikers who ride with a mission for recognition. Fred even got his community to plant a 'veterans tree' where yellow ribbons for deployed soldiers remind the community that 'our boys' are on mission in the interest of all Dutch citizens.

Cluster IV: health and social support

Risk in the dominant perception of the military job, just as in motorcycling, is thrilling, but veterans and bikers do not seek thrill out of addiction. They seek something that is fundamental to this thrill. They seek the feeling of freedom that derives from controlling your own life. When leisure time is discussed, it is associated with the need to feel free. To quote Fire Lion, one of the members of the Blue Helmets Motor Group, commandant of a Fire Brigade and veteran of Lebanon, 'we are a free group, with a passion for motorcycling'. Riding a motorcycle for veterans of military missions is more than only time off and fun as a discussion between two members of the military police in active duty demonstrates. Michel regards his motorcycle pilgrimage to Lourdes as a holiday, hoping to get back home rested and he wonders whether or not a leisure activity like fishing would help to get over experiences from the past in the same manner. Paul, however, totally disagrees:

When you are down, like I was a couple of years ago, it really helps to go on a road trip together. During fishing you are alone again. During a bike ride you can have fun together, but you know everything about everyone and sharing things is easy. You have time for serious conversation.

In this way biking provides an important relieve of stress. An American biker said 'I ride my bike to stay sane. The last time they let me out of the loony bin, I got this bike. It's just about the only thing that makes sense to me' (Dubisch, 2005: 153). Dutch veterans share the same experiences, because riding a motorcycle accommodates thrill seekers with excitement, but also provides the former warriors social support and thus results in an opportunity for catharsis and peer contact. Wild Hog who was deployed to Lebanon for over a year presents a full medical overview of his post-conflict life:

When I returned, I left the service. You have problems with everyday life; you drink or sport a lot. If you are tired or drunk, you don't have to think. You become workaholic. You go through almost all stages of addiction, and finally someone says: 'you could have PTSD'. I was diagnosed in 1983. In the beginning, after two years of treatment,

therapy was ended with the words 'there's nothing more we can do for you'. It goes on and on. In 2004 it could no longer continue and an emergency admission followed at Stichting Centrum '45 in Oegstgeest. After two years of illness and an honourable discharge, I was 100% condemned.

Bikes provide comfort to Wild Hog:

My stress relieve from this all is driving my motorcycle. I ride a trike and really enjoy it. If my head is full, I take some coffee and bread for on the road and drive. When I return after a few hours, my head is empty.

All in all thirty-seven references to health were made in the narratives of the bikers, making it the second largest issue in the texts.

By far the largest category in the analysis was 'interaction with colleagues' comprising forty-five references. The category contains explanations about the tensions within the biker community, but most interesting are the positive statements on social support among the motorcyclists. They unanimously claim that 'brothers on bikes' better understand each other because once they were 'brothers in arms'. Burb from the club Dutch Forces even goes to airports to support those members still in active duty who leave for or return from missions:

We are present in to wave goodbye but we are also there to welcome our brothers back home. Sometimes we send packages with motorcycle magazines and we keep in touch by e-mail. On return we party! These guys have experienced all sorts of things they cannot always talk about with their wife because the wife, would not understand. We do, and we lend a listening ear.

Special occasions were mentioned seventeen times. Occasions like the *Brothers in Arms Run*, the *Motorcycle pilgrimage to Lourdes* and *The Run for the Wall*, provide opportunities for the veterans to meet and support each other and are highly valued. Sometimes they even are given the aura of a sacred occasion because of the contribution to societal recognition and psychic well-being. Wild Hog very much supported the occasion:

Two years ago, we were invited to join the International Military Pilgrimage to Lourdes. That was a great ride. We, the Blue Helmets Motorcycle Group, were with ten motorbikes and one trike. In total there were forty-five motorbikes. We were on the road for four days, with many military related visits for example to Verdun. It was weird, that we suddenly slept in barracks again. In Lourdes, we gathered at the airport and drove with the whole group under police escort into the city. That was very impressive. There were many soldiers from all countries around the world. People were clapping and giving us thumbs up. We all wore our blue berets. With 45 motorcycles we entered Lourdes! What a moment!

Conclusion

Narratives have healing power. That is one of the reasons to present the narrative of Wild Hog. In Wild Hog's life story he reconstructs his identity as a veteran who did not get the recognition he needed (interactions with external parties). By driving his trike to special places like rallies and pilgrimage (special occasions) and by constructing the biker identity in which social support (interactions with colleagues) is incorporated, healing (health) is obtained. Interestingly, leverage in constructing this narrative leading to societal recognition

is provided by a grouping that is stigmatized in the same way veterans were stigmatized when they came home from the war. The bikers originally had a comparably bad reputation as the veterans, but now it is the bikers who are rewriting the narrative. Wild Hog found recognition by telling his story as a biker-veteran. In telling this story he created a narrative that works, created an identity and gained social support and partial healing.

Surprisingly the narratives of the soldier-authors are negatively correlated with those of the veteran bikers. Whereas the veteran bikers do not often mention incidents and victims (figure 2), the soldier-authors most often narrate about interactions with external parties i.e. the interactions with local Afghans and incidents involving fire contacts with the ‘opposing forces’ (figure 1). The veteran bikers weave into their stories the interactions they have with colleagues, the brotherhood of old comrades and the parallel camaraderie among bikers. Also they talk about health issues and do openly carry patches with the text ‘PTSD, not all wounds are visible’ or the emblem for wounded veterans ‘Vulneratus Nec Victus’ (wounded, but not defeated). The identity that the soldier-authors themselves construct is the identity of the professional soldier. In this self construed image of professionalism, they do not emphasize private life much in contradistinction to the bikers, but narrate about operational affairs. Quoting Noël van Bommel by repetition, the authors participated because ‘they felt that their unit [and they themselves] deserve more recognition’. Recognition here refers to recognition as professionals. The tale to be broadcasted, the story to be told, the image to uphold is all about professionalism.

	Taskforce Uruzgan	Brothers in Arms, Brothers on Bikes
High occurrence	Interactions with external parties, Incidents	Interaction with colleagues, Health
Low occurrence	Leisure, Health, occasions, Private time, Home front	Special Incidents, Victims

Table 2 Some striking differences between soldier-authors and veteran bikers

The differences might stem from methodological biases because the soldier-authors were asked to write about what moved them emotionally, and the bikers were asked why they were riding together. But since both projects, the *Task Force Uruzgan* and the *Brothers in Arms, Brothers on Bikes* projects, both departed from a very open non-directional methodology, the one using unobtrusive data and the other using a very open topic list for interviewing, it seems more likely that the differences stem from the time frame. The soldier-authors are reflecting on their mission very shortly after participating in action. The veteran bikers reflect on their present life and the aftermath of a mission that they were part of in the past. The bikers sometimes developed health problems and they find healing in the contact with their brethren on bikes who are also old comrades in arms. The soldier-authors are still mentally living the thrill of the mission, whereas the bikers need the thrill of motorcycling to feel alive once more. The soldier-authors have not developed health problems comparable to the bikers, but from expert studies we know that these type of health problems develop in the aftermath of missions, sometimes even twenty years later (Meijer and Rietveld, 2011). Perhaps in future, the soldier-authors will turn from books to bikes, or better yet, they will develop a taste for both!

The common narrative is in the longing for recognition. Both the soldier-authors and the veteran bikers construct an identity in which they demand societal recognition. The

demands can get political as they already are in Canada, Israel and the United States of America where veterans exert political pressure in order to further their interests. Those nations suffered more casualties and, except Canada, have large numbers of veterans that form an important democratic constituency. In the Netherlands the number of veterans is still relatively small, although in 2010 for the first time the number of 'young' veterans exceeded the 'old' veterans (from colonial Indonesia and Korea). But if missions are continued, if they are risky in nature and not constabulary in character, and the veteran population grows, the narrative is bound to also become political in the Netherlands at some point in the future.

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