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## **Truth and (self) censorship in military memoirs**

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### **Abstract**

It can be difficult for researchers from outside the military to gain access to the field. However, there is a rich source on the military that is readily available for every researcher: military memoirs. This source does provide some methodological challenges with regard to truth and (self) censorship, nevertheless. This study questions how truth and (self) censorship issues influence the content of these military autobiographies. It shows that these issues are not only a concern for researchers, but also for military writers themselves. The study provides concrete quantitative data based on military Afghanistan memoirs published between 2001 and 2010 from five different countries: the UK, the US, Canada, Germany, and the Netherlands. The majority of soldier-authors make some kind of truth claim in their books that they also substantiate. Military books published by traditional publishers do so significantly more often than self-published books. In books published in Anglo-Saxon countries soldier-authors make truth claims five times more often than do military authors from the Netherlands and Germany. At the same time, military authors also frequently admit

to some form of self-censuring, so truth claims and self-censorship go hand in hand.

From each of the countries studied, at least one author mentions being actively censored by the military, but most do not even mention it, making censorship a common, almost normal military feature. Making truth claims, mentioning being censored, or self-censoring do not influence the kind of plots these authors write either in a negative, or positive way.

### **Keywords**

Autobiography, censorship, military author, military book, military memoir, self-censorship, self-publishing, soldier-author, truth, Afghanistan, ISAF, OEF.

## **Introduction**

The military is a rather inaccessible social field for outside researchers: internal documents are difficult to access, senior officers and military interviewees in general may have internalized censorship and participant observation is ‘far from being welcome and facilitated’ (Deschaux-Beaume, 2012: 107). The military institution is not unique in this, but its inner-directedness and ‘national security’ being the main organizational charter render the military even more closed than large-scale civilian organizations (Ben Ari and Levy, 2014). Military organizational culture and ethos put a strong emphasis on community life, mutual bonding and (self) discipline. This prevents soldiers and officers from being very open to outsiders, particularly in reference to the military’s core business: experiences in war-like operations (e.g., Soeters, 2015). However, there is a rich source on the military - also the military in action - that is readily available for every researcher: self-narratives, more specifically military memoirs.

Military memoirs have been written since ancient times – the first military memoir that has survived was written in the fourth century BC by the Greek historian and soldier Xenophon (Harari, 2007: 290). Military memoirs since then have grown in numbers; they are among the largest categories of autobiographies in general (Bjorklund, 1998: 182). Memoirs are particularly interesting to sociologists because they constitute a “presentation of self” (Bjorklund, 1998) and are expected to be influenced by time-,

culture- en space-related conditions. Military memoirs therefore are an important source of information for understanding the military in their varying sociological contexts (Bjorklund, 1998: 124ff.).

This source does provide some methodological challenges, however. One might wonder about the 'truth' of these autobiographies and whether their content is affected by the fact that these books are prone to official censorship by the military in order to preserve operational security. Again, a concern about the truth of autobiographies is not unique for military memoirs. Authors of autobiographies in general want to be trusted by their readers and they want to be seen as honest (Bjorklund, 1998: 27-31). However, if we want to use military memoirs as sources of understanding of the military, truth claims in these autobiographies exceed the importance of the individual author's concern about their memoirs being trustworthy.

This article shows that challenges about truth and (self) censorship are not only a concern for researchers, but also for military writers themselves and provides insight into the way soldier-authors deal with these issues by providing concrete quantitative data based on military memoirs published between 2001 and 2010 dealing with Afghanistan experiences from five different countries (the UK, the US, Canada, Germany and the Netherlands). In sum, the question in this article is how and to what extent the content of military memoirs is influenced by truth and (self) censorship issues.

## **Truth questions in (military) autobiographies**

### *Truth claims*

Aristotle discussed the role of truth in his *Poetics*. He distinguishes two types of writers, poets and historians, whereby according to him the historian's duty is to talk about events that took place and the poet's duty is to talk about events that could happen (Aristotle, about 330 BC/2004: IX 51a36). Basically, what he does is discern between fiction (poet) and non-fiction (historian) whereby only the non-fiction is bound to write the truth. Nowadays autobiographies in general (which includes military memoirs) are seen as a specific form of non-fiction, whereby the author is regarded more as an Aristotelian historian than a poet. Autobiographies come with what autobiography researcher Philippe Lejeune calls the 'autobiographical pact', the idea that the reader can trust that the author of an autobiography is a real person, who tells his or her real story. In its most basic form, the autobiographical pact presumes that the author, the narrator and the protagonist are identical (Lejeune, 1989: 11-12). Explicitly taking credit for truthfulness has been commonplace since ancient times in prefaces of both historical works and autobiographies (Genette, 1997: 206; Baggerman and Dekker, 2004: 9). Making these claims can be seen as a speech act of assertion, which is a speech act designed to commit a speaker to the truth (Austin, 1962).

Why do autobiographers make these truth claims? Put simply, authors of memoirs want to feel trusted by their audience; they want to be seen as sincere, honest and truthful because these are likeable personality traits (Bjorklund, 1998: 27). But there is more to this than psychological motives. French literary theorist Gérard Genette (Genette, 1997: 206) and British military memoir researcher Rachel Woodward suggest that truth claims serve a marketing purpose as 'the stamp of authenticity guarantees sales to a readership intrigued by questions about what military violence is actually like' (Woodward, 2008: 368). That seems a plausible reason, and which will be explored in this article, but may not be the only reason. Some large studies, such as the seminal Hofstede research and more recently the GLOBE study, have been able to identify variables that distinguish countries based on culture (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005; Chhokar et al., 2007; House et al., 2004). The GLOBE study, for example, showed that the five countries studied in this article can culturally be divided into two distinct groups, the 'Anglo cluster' (the US, the UK and Canada) and the 'Germanic Europe cluster' (Germany and the Netherlands). It will be interesting to see whether these cultural differences also influence the literary custom of providing truth claims in military memoirs, which is particularly important because military operational styles have been shown to vary among nations (Soeters, 2013), as do the kind of plots that are written by military authors (Kleinreesink, 2014).

According to Genette, historians (but not autobiographers) even back their truthfulness claims up with specific truth guarantees. 'Thucydides, for example, maintains that he

relies only on direct observation or duly corroborated testimony' (Genette, 1997: 206). The standards to which autobiographers are held are not that high, however, according to the *Encyclopedia of Life Writing*: 'Autobiographers are generally not viewed as obliged to research their own lives; the presumed subjectivity of the genre gains them a degree of latitude when it comes to fact checking' (Couser, 2001b: 222-223).

### *From eyewitness to flesh-witness*

Autobiographies have not always been regarded as a subjective genre. In her article on the history of the reception of autobiography, Dutch historian Marijke Huisman concludes that until the 19th century, autobiographies were seen as objectively true, but by the end of the 19th century they were no longer regarded as historical texts, but as subjective testimonies (Huisman, 2011). Until the middle of the 20th century, historians regarded autobiographies as 'extremely unreliable' and 'simply useless' (Dekker, 2002: 21). However, with a developing, postmodern orientation in which texts are seen as a medium to investigate opinions instead of facts in itself, the study of autobiographies has been reappraised from problematic to offering exciting new research opportunities. Lejeune stresses that autobiographies should not be seen as sources of historical information, but rather as '*social facts* in themselves, in their reality as texts' (Lejeune, 1989: 165). Nowadays, autobiographies are seen as socially determined constructs (e.g.

Berger and Luckmann, 1966/1991; Mascuch, 1997; Bjorklund, 1998; Roper, 2000), providing a subjective, socially constructed truth, not an objective one.

Not only have scientists made this change, but also modern writers themselves who are often conscious of how difficult it can be to express 'the truth' or 'reality' in words (Baggerman and Dekker, 2004: 22). And this is not necessarily a 20th-century phenomenon. According to Israeli military memoir researcher Yuval Harari, by the 16th century it was already clear that the objectivity from eyewitness accounts was rather poor and military writers writing these accounts 'often admitted that they were poorly positioned to give a factually detailed and accurate description of war' (Harari, 2009: 216). Where in earlier times military memoirs were eyewitness accounts, stating objective facts about the war as adequately as possible, a new form of authority starts in the 18th century 'that of flesh-witnessing, which is based not on the observation of facts, but on having undergone personal experience' (Harari, 2009: 217). That has a number of consequences. Where the eyewitness gains authority by providing the reader with factual knowledge, the flesh-witness gains authority by the very fact that he tells the story, as he lived it in the flesh. So it will come as no surprise that US military autobiography researcher Samuel Hynes concludes that although military autobiographies are true, they are not truthful, as personal narratives are different from history (Hynes, 1997: 16). Echoing Harari's distinction between eyewitness and flesh-witness he writes: 'We are confronted with an apparent contradiction here: the man-

who-was-there asserts his authority as the only true witness of his war; but the truth that he claims to tell is compromised by the very nature of memory and language' (Hynes, 1997: 25). Nonetheless, German literature scholar Elisabeth Krimmer concludes in her book *The Representation of War in German Literature* that secondary literature dealing with war texts is often preoccupied with historical accuracy. 'Consciously or subliminally, authenticity emerges as the gold standard of war writing' (Krimmer, 2010: 5).

### *Memory*

When talking about the concept of truth, the concept of memory always needs to be considered as well, as Hynes does, for the writer's memory is the basis of what he or she writes about. As the *Encyclopedia of Life Writing* puts it: '[The autobiography's] narrative authority derives not from research but from personal experience, from memory and subjectivity – that is from self-identity' (Couser, 2001a: 73). If that memory is perfect than what is written down could be considered the truth as long as it perfectly resembles whatever is contained in the writer's memory. That is a big 'if', especially when considering recent memory research. In the past, the functioning of the memory was sometimes thought of as a video recorder, albeit a not entirely perfect one (Schacter and Addis, 2007: 773). However, when summing up current research, memory researchers Elizabeth Loftus and J.E. Pickrell conclude that '[v]irtually

thousands of studies have documented how our memories can be disrupted by things that we experienced earlier (proactive interference) or things that we experienced later (retroactive interference)' (Loftus and Pickrell, 1995: 720). Psychologists Daniel Schacter and Donna Addis therefore conclude that '[m]emory is not a literal reproduction of the past, but rather is a constructive process in which bits and pieces of information from various sources are pulled together' (Schacter and Addis, 2007: 773). Their current assumption is that episodic memory, the memory that recollects past experiences, functions more like a simulator to project the future and calculate possible scenarios than like a video recorder.

All this means also is that human memory is an unreliable tool and that historical, objective truth guarantees cannot be expected from the memories of soldier-authors. At most a subjective, socially constructed 'truth' or truthfulness - a presentation and an interpretation of self (Bjorklund, 1998) - can be found in their books.

### *Censorship*

Having looked at the theoretical underpinnings surrounding the subject of truth, let us now focus on the second challenge in military memoirs: censorship. Although in democracies censorship in the sense of preventative supervision aimed at the content of freedom of speech is generally frowned upon, even in democracies there are some limitations to freedom of expression (Coolen, 2004: 89). The European Convention on

Human Rights (article 10) for example allows (among others) restrictions for interests of national security, public safety, protection of health and protection of the reputation and the rights of others.

In the military, by definition an organisation that deals with issues of national security, public safety and protecting others, these exceptions to the restriction of censorship are daily reality and personnel are trained and expected to keep to a high level of what is technically called OpSec: operational security. OpSec leads to censorship as the military try to preview written expressions by its own personnel engaged in operations such as letters home, blogs, articles, and – relevant for this study – books. This is not a modern phenomenon, as wars have traditionally been surrounded by censorship measures (Smith, 1992: 13; Fussell, 1975/2000: 175). In order to preserve OpSec, some egodocuments have always been checked by the military before being distributed. In both World Wars it was common practice to censor letters written by military personnel to the home front. Although nowadays letters or blogs are no longer actively censored, they are bound by OpSec rules and books written by military personnel are still checked before publication by the military for OpSec problems. What is a new phenomenon, however, is the fact that in the digital era keeping total control of all written expressions, such as military blogs, has become virtually impossible (Resteigne, 2010: 524).

In military organisations, the formal censoring is accompanied by self-censoring by military personnel as OpSec is not just an organisational necessity, but also a personal necessity: if you provide sensitive information that is abused by the enemy, you endanger the lives of your fellow soldiers and yourselves. This is a form of what political philosopher John Horton calls 'instrumental self-censorship'. 'We understand ourselves neither to be merely exercising self-control nor to be simply subject to ordinary censorship: that is, neither acting entirely out of our own volition nor being effectively coerced: it is the uneasy and variable combination of both' (Horton, 2011: 99). Despite the uneasiness that accompanies censorship and self-censorship, the organisational and personal operational security interests still make it unsurprising that recent sociological research into censorship of military blogs in Belgium shows that 52% of soldiers questioned were 'very supportive of institutional control over blogs held by personnel' and that military bloggers 'generally exert a sort of self-censorship, by not posting certain kinds of sensitive information, or by deleting comments that could be sensitive' (Resteigne, 2010: 522).

OpSec also means that Ministries of Defence were and are ambiguous about books published by (former) soldiers. On the one hand, they endorse them. Book writing projects such as *Operation Homecoming* (Carroll, 2008) in the US and *Task Force Uruzgan* (Van Bommel, 2009) in the Netherlands, in which accomplished book writers give workshops to military personnel just returned from Afghanistan to help them to

write short stories about their experiences, are fully supported by defence public relations departments. For any organization, creating a good image is important to ensure its continuity and for organizations that are dependent on politics, such as the armed forces, public support also helps in furthering their cause. This can be a reason to encourage soldiers to write books about their experiences. On the other hand, Ministries of Defence are also concerned about leaking too much information, thereby endangering operational security, or about creating a negative image in these books and might therefore choose to discourage soldiers from writing down their deployment stories.

Censorship is not a purely military phenomenon, however. Next to these forms of censorship that are specific to the military, the *Encyclopedia of Life Writing* distinguishes forms of censorship that are general to all life writing. Censors here are often family members of the author that seek protection from being hurt by the revelations in the book, and self-censorship can mainly be found 'by artfully omitting less flattering details' (Rollyson, 2001: 193).

## **Methods**

In order to study the way in which soldier-authors deal with these issues of truth and (self) censorship, a database was created with all non-fiction, autobiographical books, first published between 2001 and 2010 in the US, the UK, Canada, Germany or the Netherlands that were written in Dutch, English or German, (mainly) deal with the

deployment experiences of western military personnel in Afghanistan and were intended for the public at large. Given the situation in Afghanistan all these memoirs are about the military in action in unsafe, conflict-ridden conditions. Factual information on each of these books was also stored in the database, such as information on the publishing strategy, whether it was published by a traditional publisher (which carries the publishing costs and risks) or by a self-publisher (where the author pays the publishing costs).

These books were found based on three different search methods: Existing lists with military books (e.g. from expert centres, military websites and book reviews), libraries and finally book websites were searched for books that fit the definition above. This resulted in 54 books (US: 22, UK: 15, Germany: 7, the Netherlands: 7, Canada: 3), which to the best of our knowledge is the complete research population as defined earlier.

Based on content-analysis of these 54 books, relevant variables, such as the occurrence and types of truth claims (subjective/objective), truth guarantees and self-censorship and the nature of the overall book plots were coded directly into a database. Plots were divided into two groups: 'negative plots' and 'positive plots'. A negative plot is a plot in which the main change for the protagonist is from negative to positive, a positive plot has the opposite change, or is positive all the way through. In this definition the variable

positive/negative focuses on the positivity of the hero's journey (Campbell, 1949), which does not necessarily correspond with the overall storyline.

These data were then analysed with SPSS. An alpha level of .05 was used for all statistical tests. Two types of statistical tests were performed: chi-square and t-tests. The main statistical tests performed were chi-square tests, as most of the data in the research database are nominal, the number of cases are relatively low ( $n = 54$ ) and the data are independent. Where necessary and possible, data were made dichotomous in order to comply with the statistical requirement of a minimum expected value of five in each cell. In 2x2 tables Fisher's exact test was used instead of Pearson chi-square.

Because the 54 military memoirs constitute *all* military memoirs of soldier-authors deployed to Afghanistan that were published in the USA, the UK, Canada, Germany and the Netherlands between 2001 and 2010, statistical probability testing is not really needed. We conducted these statistical procedures nonetheless to give an indication of the external validity of our findings, at least from a statistical point of view. Of course, generalization of our findings to military memoirs from soldier-authors of other nations may not be guaranteed given the variation in political and social conditions in those nations. As Howard Becker (1998: 55) noted "the environing conditions of a (...) phenomenon are crucial to its occurrence or existence in the form it eventually takes place."

## Results

### *Truth*

When analyzing the data, the first noticeable conclusion is that writing 'the truth' is an element of military memoirs that is emphasized by soldier-authors in their books. The majority of them (57%) make some kind of truth claim. This is in line with the conventions of the autobiographical genre (e.g., Bjorklund, 1998). These truth claims can be further divided: whereas 43% of the memoirs contain no truth claims, 22% claim to tell the objective truth and 35% claim to tell the subjective truth.

*Objective truth claim.* An objective truth claim occurs if the author speaks about the events in his or her memoirs without any qualifiers: the message in the book is that what is being written down is unequivocally true. A typical objective truth claim comes from Craig Mullaney in his book *The Unforgiving Minute* who starts his author's note with the sentence: 'This is a true story' (Mullaney, 2009: 379). Another form of objective truth claim is given by the publisher instead of the author, such as in *Man Down*, in which the colophon reads:

This book is a work of non-fiction based on the life, experiences and recollections of Mark Ormrod. In some cases names of people have been

changed to protect the privacy of others. *The author has stated to the publishers that, except in such respects, not affecting the substantial accuracy of the work, the contents of this book are true* [italics added]. (Ormrod, 2009: iv)

These objective truth claimers simply state that they write the truth, without any further elaboration on ontological and epistemological questions on what truth is and whether it is possible to know this truth. They resemble Harari's historical eye-witness accounts (Harari, 2009).

*Subjective truth claim.* The majority (61%) of truth claims, however, are not objective, but subjective claims. Although these writers also claim to describe some form of truth, they do comment on the nature of that truth and they are conscious of the fact that what they write is only an approximation of their own reality. They explicitly admit that other people in similar circumstances may have experienced the events during the deployment differently. Martien van der Heijden, for example, writes in *Huisarts in Uruzgan*<sup>1</sup>:

I will try to describe my experiences as adequately as possible [...]. Whoever reads this does have to understand that this is my story, my experience and my

perception. It might well be that someone else who has been deployed in the same period to Camp Holland has experienced it in a totally different way.<sup>2</sup>  
(Van der Heijden, 2009: 5-6)

This fits with Baggerman's and Dekker's observation that it is common for ego-document authors to claim their own honesty and also with their observation that ego-document authors nowadays are often conscious of how difficult it can be to express the truth or reality in words (Baggerman and Dekker, 2004: 9, 22). It also fits Harari's conclusion that in modern times flesh-witnessing (undergoing a personal experience) has become more important than the eye-witness observations of facts (Harari, 2009: 217).

### *Influences on truth*

When scrutinizing the influences on a truth claim, we want to take a look at Woodward's and Genette's suggestion that these truth claims serve a marketing purpose (Woodward, 2008: 368; Genette, 1997: 206). If this is true, we can expect to see more truth claims in the books published by professional publishers, than by those that are self-published. This is indeed the case: authors with a traditional publisher are four times more likely to add a truth claim to their books than self-publishers ( $p_{\text{one-sided}} =$

.013). Only one-third (6 out of 18) of self-published books provide a truth claim, while the majority (69%, 25 out of 36) of traditionally published books do so.

Besides the use as a marketing ploy, clearly there is also a cultural aspect present in the use of truth statements, as there is a significant difference ( $p = .026$ ) between the use of truth claims between the Anglo cluster countries (UK, US and Canada) and the Germanic Europe cluster (Germany and the Netherlands), as can be seen in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Truth Claims per Country.

	Truth claim			Total
	No	Objective	Subjective	
<b>The Netherlands</b>	4	0	3	<b>7</b>
<b>Germany</b>	6	1	0	<b>7</b>
<b>United Kingdom</b>	4	4	7	<b>15</b>
<b>United States</b>	8	7	7	<b>22</b>
<b>Canada</b>	1	0	2	<b>3</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>54</b>

In the Anglo-cluster countries, soldier-authors are five times more likely than in the Germanic Europe cluster countries to make a truth claim, which finding can only

partially be explained by the fact that the books in these countries are more often published by traditional publishers<sup>3</sup>. Indeed the majority of the authors in the USA, the UK and Canada make such a claim, to try to make sure their readers are convinced of the truth of their memoirs. In Germany and the Netherlands, however, only a minority make a truth claim, apparently not being so interested in convincing their audience that they ‘preach the truth’. In Germany, only one of the seven authors does so. There is, however, no statistical difference between the use of objective or subjective truth claims between the two groups of countries ( $p = 1.000$ ). These results suggest that the use of truth claims in general has both a marketing and a cultural component, as it is seen more in traditionally published books (marketing) and in Anglo-cluster countries (cultural).

### *Truth guarantees*

So, explicitly taking credit for truthfulness is a phenomenon we can clearly still see in the writings of these soldier-authors. But according to Genette, only historians are known to back up their truth claims with specific truth guarantees (Genette, 1997: 206). What is therefore interesting is that the results of this study show that soldier-authors also provide truth guarantees, on average two (1.77) per book with a truth claim in it.

Craig Mullaney, for example writes:

I had to rely on more than my memory in writing this book. To that end I was fortunate in having journal entries, letters, emails, and photographs [...] petrol reports, maps, radio logs. Additionally, I interviewed many of my soldiers and colleagues and asked them to read early drafts and to correct any inaccuracies. (Mullaney, 2009: 379)

Almost all (94%) soldier-authors who make a truth claim also substantiate their claim. Like Mullaney, they do so with a variety of guarantees, some of them more objective (i.e. photographs, reports, research) than others (i.e. memory, statements to publishers). The most often used truth guarantees are the writer's own memory (mentioned in 68% of the books with truth claims), a diary (35%), other people's memory (26%) and emails and letters (23%). Other truth guarantees mentioned were photographs (mentioned three times), reports (two times), statement to publisher (two times) and research (mentioned once).

These truth guarantees are reasonably in accordance with what the *Encyclopedia of Life Writing* writes on research sources for autobiographies, that '[i]ts narrative authority derives not from research but from personal experience, from memory and subjectivity' (Couser, 2001a: 73).

The numbers show that memory indeed has a prominent role among the truth guarantees provided, and that research as such is only mentioned by one soldier-author. However,

there does seem to be an inclination to provide the reader with more certainty than just a ‘trust me on my word’. Soldier-authors apparently find it very important to emphasise and substantiate their truth claims, also with more objective methods such as reports and photographs, which shows an inner need to be heard and believed.

*Memory.* That the rather subjective guarantee of memory is the most prominent truth guarantee is clear. Twenty-two soldier-authors say they trusted on their own or others’ memory when writing their books, which amounts to 41% of all soldier-authors and 71% of the ones that make a truth claim. Of those, almost two-thirds (64%) rely solely on their own memory and one-third on both their own and on others’ memory. For exactly half of them memory is the only truth guarantee they provide.

The acknowledgement of the use of memory is not statistically related to variables such as the (higher) age of the writer ( $p = .239$ )<sup>4</sup> (even though there is a medium-sized effect:  $r = .25$ ), or a longer time between deployment and publication ( $p = .925$ )<sup>5</sup>. There is a strong relationship, however, between the writers who claim to write about a subjective truth and the acknowledged use of memory (memory in general:  $p = .012$ ; own memory:  $p = .021$ ). Someone who writes that he or she describes only their own, subjective, truth is 12 times more likely to acknowledge making use of memory as a research tool. This suggests that people who consciously make use of memory as a writing tool are also more conscious of the limitations that memory brings with it and

thereby of the subjectivity of their image of the world. Alternatively, it may also be possible that writers who adopt a postmodern view of the world, which includes a subjective or constructivist view of the truth are more likely to acknowledge the role that memory plays in the construction of their truth.

From this we can conclude that in general soldier-authors satisfy the common expectation of autobiographers: the majority make a truthfulness claim, likely for marketing (and cultural) reasons and their stories are mostly based on subjective memory. These truthfulness claims are also at times substantiated with some forms of proper research.

### *Disclaimer*

What is even more interesting is that the majority of soldier-authors (59%) also make some kind of disclaimer as to the content of their book, and that these disclaimers are in no way related to their truth claims, and are posed by all authors alike ( $p = .411$ ). These disclaimers take two distinct forms: they are either literary disclaimers or forms of self-censorship. Military writers are predominantly (88%) occupied with providing disclaimers that have to do with self-censorship.

Craig Mullaney makes a typical literary disclaimer:

By necessity, the dialogue is an approximation of conversations that I can't recall verbatim. (Mullaney, 2009: 379)

Martien van der Heijden by contrast makes self-censorship disclaimers:

I will not be able to write about everything, since specific cases may also be read by others who can use it to extract useful information. So I cannot discuss tactical and operational events. In the same way, I will try to relate experiences with other soldiers and/or civilian in the most anonymous way possible, so they won't get into trouble if the wrong people read my book.<sup>6</sup> (Van der Heijden, 2009: 5)

Disclaimers for literary reasons can only be found in four books (7% of all books, 13% of all books with a disclaimer). These take the form of either an apology for the fictionality of the use of dialogues, as Mullaney does, or of playing with timelines or dates in order to make the book easier to read.

Self-censorship disclaimers however are given in 31 books (57% of all books, 97% of all books with a disclaimer). The most frequently made self-censorship disclaimers have to do with anonymizing the people discussed in the books. In 84% of disclaimers, names have been changed and in 34% of the cases photographs have been black-barred. Other self-censorship disclaimers have to do with leaving out details (13%), obscuring places (9%) or changing events (9%).

*Names.* Protection of the people involved for operational security reasons, is in line with common military safety precautions such as removing nametags from uniforms when getting photographed, interviewed or attending a local market, in order to diminish the possibility of any kind of personal retaliation by opponents - a safety consciousness that is thoroughly ingrained in every modern soldier and that clearly shows up in these books. It is quite a contrast with Renaissance military memoirs in which memoirs (and history in general) are seen as 'the universal hall of fame and honor' (Harari, 2008: 113), whereby naming names is more or less the whole purpose of writing memoirs. Nowadays, generally other people are only specifically named in these books in the form of lists in the appendices. These are hero lists constituting either the names of the people killed in action, or those awarded a combat medal.

*Illustrations.* What is interesting is that not only are names anonymized, but also photographs. Although literary books for the adult market nowadays rarely contain illustrations, in stark contrast with 19th century novels (Sillars, 1995: 16), almost all military memoirs (94%) contain illustrations. Mostly these are photographs taken by the author himself, but half of them (52%) also contain maps. In 11 books (20% of all books) one or more of these photographs are black-barred to hide the identity of the people in it. This black-barring occurs for fellow-soldiers, Afghan citizens, opponents and sometimes for the author him/herself. In one case even the author photo in the

biography section, by an author who uses a pseudonym, is black-barred to protect his identity (Macy, 2008).

*Self-censorship.* These forms of self-censorship are absolutely not reserved for people who are still in service, as people who were no longer working for the MoD when their book was published were just as likely to censor themselves as active soldiers ( $p = 1.000$ ).

Neither is it a country ( $p = .416$ ) or Anglo or Germanic European dependent variable ( $p = 1.000$ ), as can be seen in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Self-Censored Books per Country.

	Self-censored		Total
	No	Yes	
<b>The Netherlands</b>	4	3	<b>7</b>
<b>Germany</b>	2	5	<b>7</b>
<b>United Kingdom</b>	4	11	<b>15</b>
<b>United States</b>	11	11	<b>22</b>
<b>Canada</b>	2	1	<b>3</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>54</b>

This seems to be first of all a form of self-discipline that is ingrained in soldiers in order to provide a secure environment for themselves and others. As reservist and legal advisor Gijs Scholtens writes:

Obviously, my weekly letters and the other contents of this book will contain no operational, let alone secret information. I have therefore consciously imposed the self-censorship necessary from a security point of view in my weekly letters.<sup>7</sup> (Scholtens, 2007: 7)

It is not just social desirability that causes this self-censorship. There may be at least two other reasons for it. The first one is a marketing reason: black-barring of photographs in particular shows the exciting and secretive nature of the work described in the books, thereby adding sales value. The second reason for self-censorship may be that it is a precursor of an organisational constraint that in western countries is specific to the military: censorship.

*Censorship.* In each of the countries at least one of the soldier-authors indicates that his or her book was checked by the Ministry of Defence (Germany, UK, Canada: one; the Netherlands: two; US: five). This censorship is a common military feature that is not

country-dependent ( $p = .619$ ). It is so common, that most authors do not even mention being censored, and when they do so it is generally in a neutral or positive way<sup>8</sup>.

Ray Wiss for example writes:

As a serving officer in the Canadian Forces, my priority is to ensure that nothing I do harms our combat efficiency. I therefore worked closely with the Operational Security (OpSec) branch to ensure that this book gave nothing away that our enemies might use to any advantage, no matter how small. This process had no impact on the story. The OpSec personnel often merely asked that a sentence be rewritten to make a detail somewhat vaguer, rather than removing the sentence completely [...] Not a single paragraph's meaning or import was altered. (Wiss, 2009: 3-4)

In one of the books, the possible extent of the censorship, however, does become quite salient. In *Operation Dark Heart* by military intelligence agent Anthony Shaffer, black-barring is not used for photographs, but for the text itself. The first edition of the book was bought up and destroyed by the American Department of Defense (DoD) for security reasons and the subsequent edition was published in the same format, however with the full extent of the DoD censorship visible (Shaffer, 2010; *Time*, 2010). His publisher starts this second edition with an extensive explanation on this censoring process:

This was unexpected, since we knew the author, Lieutenant Colonel Anthony Shaffer, had worked closely with the Department of the Army, and had made a number of changes to the text, after which it passed the Army's operational security review. [...] based on the discussions our author had with the government he requested that we incorporate some of the government's changes into a revised edition of his book while redacting other text he was told was classified, though he disagreed with that assessment. (Shaffer, 2010: i)

Those soldier-authors who actively indicate that they have been censored do not write different stories from authors who do not indicate any formal censorship. Their stories are not more negative ( $p = .728$ ).

However, of the 10 authors who actively acknowledge having been censored, three of them indicated that they were also actively discouraged from writing the book, and two of these authors were still working for the Ministry of Defence (MoD) when their book was published. All three of them did write (very) negative plots, although this is not statistically significant due to the low number of cases ( $p = .071$ ). An example comes from *Kill Bin Laden*:

my attorney [ ... ] skilfully undertook to navigate the muddy waters of the approval process with SOCOM – an approval that never came. [...] I have been

tagged persona non grata – ‘PNGed’ we call it – by Delta’s higher headquarters, the Joint Special Operations Command. (Fury, 2008: xiii, xxv)

This gives some indication that active discouragement by the defence organisation might lead to more negative plots. The other causal relationship is, however, just as likely: that very negative plots lead to discouragement from MoDs wanting to protect their image.

The same number of authors (three) indicated the opposite, namely being actively encouraged by their MoD. Doug Beattie writes:

I am also very pleased to publicly acknowledge my colleagues at the Ministry of Defence – not least Colonel Ben Bathurst at the Directorate of Defence Public Relations (Army) and my commanding officer Lieutenant Colonel Ed Freely – for their backing of this project and their timely and appropriate advice when required. (Beattie and Gomm, 2008: ix)

## **Conclusion**

The military institution is a closed but important segment of society. Getting access to this organization for research purposes is usually not easy, particularly not when the study focuses on the military in action. Therefore it is important to make use of sources that are openly available, such as military memoirs that are published and sold on the open market. Military memoirs constitute the interpretation and presentation of experiences by military people in the context of the military institution and society-at-large. As such, military memoirs tell a lot about individual people's lives but also about the military institution in all its varieties. Truth and (self) censorship issues play a role here as they influence what has been written down. This is something most authors themselves are aware of.

The majority (57%) of soldier-authors provide some kind of truth claim as to the contents of their book. Of those making truth claims, the majority (61%) acknowledge the subjectivity of their truth claim, fitting our postmodern era. The fact that this more often occurs in books published by traditional publishers supports existing theories that this practice is a marketing tool. These truth claims are important to soldiers for positioning their books as non-fiction stories, which is quite common for autobiographers. What is unusual, however, is that they also provide evidence for their truth claims, often only in the form of their own memory, but sometimes also in the

form of some sort of research. Contrary to other autobiographical writers, soldier-authors substantiate their truth claims, fitting the specific demands of war writing in which authenticity is seen as the gold standard.

For soldier-authors, these truth claims can go hand-in-hand with disclaimers and censorship. A large part of them (59%) make some kind of disclaimer as to the content of their book; almost always (in 97% of the cases) about some form of self-censorship for operational security reasons, such as anonymizing names or black-barring photographs. We can conclude from these data that for soldier-authors censorship and self-censoring are normal, integral parts of being a soldier, irrespective of country. It is a manifestation of the strong self-discipline that soldiers have acquired while becoming military people. Censorship seems to be so normal that most soldier-authors do not even mention it and it does not lead to more negative plots. What is interesting is that defence organisations do not seem to actively encourage their personnel to write books; on the contrary, the number of soldier-authors who specifically indicate that they have been encouraged by their organisation is just as low as the number of soldier-authors who have been discouraged. In both cases only three.

In addition to Bjorklund's large-scale study containing analyses of over 100 American autobiographies (1998), this is we believe the first quantitative research into military autobiographies. As it emerged from Bjorklund's study, truth claims are fairly common in self-narratives; in our study also this phenomenon occurred as a major qualifier of the

memoirs' content. However, compared to Bjorklund's autobiographies, the military memoirs in our study not only reveal aspects of individual people's lives but also the impact of the conditioning dynamics of the military institution. From there on, truth claims in this study are clearly more than the psychological need to be seen as a truthful, sincere and honest person. In military memoirs truth claims are also the result of self-censorship, culture-related internalized censorship and explicit institutional censorship including encouragement and discouragement by the military organization. In further studies it needs to be seen if and how these and possibly other dynamics impact on military memoirs authored by soldiers in other countries than the ones we studied.

The final conclusion can be that as long as military memoirs are not seen as providing objective historical data, but instead as rich sources of socially constructed data, as the soldier-authors themselves also indicate, they are a very interesting and readily available source on the military.

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## Notes

1. *Family Doctor in Uruzgan*

2. Our translation

3. While Anglo-Saxon authors are only 2,5 times more likely to have a traditional publisher, which is not a significant difference from the continental European (German and Dutch) authors ( $p = .188$ ).

4. Average age no memory:  $M = 34.2$ ;  $SD = 11.4$ ; Average age with memory:  $M = 39.8$ ;  $SD = 9.4$ .

5. Average years to publication no memory:  $M = 2.6$ ;  $SD = 2.4$ ; Average years to publication with memory:  $M = 2.6$ ;  $SD = 2.0$ ;  $t(29) = -.10$ ,  $r = .02$  (no effect).

6. Our translation

7. Our translation

8. From email and personal conversations with many authors it is clear that in most of the countries researched, many more military memoirs are actively checked before being publishing, especially those books by authors who are still working for their Ministry of Defence when their book is first published.

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**Esmeralda Kleinreesink** is a lieutenant-colonel with the Royal Netherlands Air Force, who works as an assistant professor at the Netherlands Defence Academy. In 2014 she obtained her doctorate with her dissertation *On Military Memoirs*. The dissertation deals with all military Afghanistan memoirs published between 2001 and 2010 in five different countries: the US, the UK, Germany, Canada and the Netherlands. This interdisciplinary and mixed-method study answers three main questions: who are these soldier-authors, what do they write about and why do they write? She published several short stories and an autobiography (*Officier in Afghanistan*, Meulenhoff, 2012) about her own deployment in Afghanistan.

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