


Making Sense of War Memories: An Analysis of Dutch Veteran Return Trips to Former Yugoslavia

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Abstract This article analyzes the war memories and processes of meaning-making of Dutch veterans who returned to places related to their deployment in former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. It argues that the incentive to return can be found in the difficulties that veterans have in assigning positive meaning to their deployment because existing collective and cultural memories about the war and the genocide in Srebrenica do not align with many of the veterans' experiences during and after the war. In the analysis of interviews conducted with seventeen Dutch veterans, attention is paid to their wartime memories, motivation to return, and experiences during the return trips. Returning to former places of deployment provides a way to reconcile memories, especially traumatic ones. The building of these memories passes through several phases: introspection; opening up to family, friends, and relatives; and helping others. [veterans, return trip, memory, trauma, and Bosnia-Herzegovina]

In July 2008, Frank, a 42-year-old Dutch military veteran, departed from the Bosnian town of Srebrenica. It was not the first time he did so. Thirteen years earlier, Frank had left Srebrenica, after he was released by the Bosnian-Serb army. With 15 other members of his unit, he was captured and held hostage for a week in Serbian territory. During this week, the troops of General Ratko Mladić attacked the safe haven Srebrenica, packed with Bosniak (Bosnian Muslim) refugees from all over the region. Srebrenica was supposed to be protected by the Dutch UN forces stationed in a battery factory in the neighboring village of Potočari. The occupying Bosnian-Serb troops threatened to kill Frank and the other hostages if NATO executed air strikes on Srebrenica and its surroundings. In the days after the occupation, over 8,300 Bosniaks were murdered by the Bosnian-Serb troops while trying to escape to safer areas.¹

As a hostage, Frank did not see this happen. After a terrifying week, he and his colleagues were released and transported to the Netherlands. Yet, their experiences in former Yugoslavia left their mark, and later, Frank developed post-traumatic stress disorder. After treatment, Frank went back to Srebrenica in 2008, in the company of six other veterans. This time he made sure that he was in control of his departure from the town. He took the wheel and, as he phrases it, left his personal baggage behind. One return trip was followed by many others, the start of a volunteer project, and reunions with newly made Bosnian friends.

Frank is not the only veteran who returned to Bosnia-Herzegovina years after his deployment there; many of his colleagues have done so too. Veteran return trips to places associated

with military or peacekeeping missions have been happening since at least the nineteenth century (Gatewood and Cameron 2004). The number of trips surged after the First World War, when soldiers returned to places related to their service (Lloyd 1998, 38 and 145; Walter 1993, 64). Second World War veterans similarly undertook return trips to the places of their deployment—and continue doing so, often accompanied by their families (Captain 2008; Fallon and Robinson 2017; Murakami 2018). The same goes for veterans of the Vietnam War (Schwenkel 2015; Chadwick 2016).

Although battlefield tourism has gained substantial scholarly attention the last decades (e.g., Lloyd 1998; Seaton 2000; Butler and Suntikul 2013; Eade and Katić 2018), these studies focus on battlefield tourists in general. Less is known about the experiences of one specific group of visitors: returning veterans. Scholars who have researched return trips frame them as secular pilgrimages or rites of passage, hinting at the character of the trips as personal quests for meaning and salvation (Walter 1993; Eade and Katić 2018). As such, scholars distinguish those trips from general forms of tourism predominantly characterized by entertainment. The pilgrimage analogy is not only used for trips to former battle sites but also for journeys to war memorials and even veteran reunions in their home countries (Michalowski and Dubisch 2001; Dubisch 2005; Murakami 2014). Veteran pilgrimages are seen as commemorative practices that allow participants to remember the past and reconcile with former adversaries (Murakami 2018, 41).

Using the analogy of the pilgrimage seems a logical choice to explain the search for meaning, transformation, and contemplation embodied by the traveling veteran. Yet, this analogy overlooks other, less romantic, characteristics of travel (Eade and Katić 2018). A returning veteran could experience disappointment, fear, or rejection. A return trip might also result in mundane experiences more often associated with tourism than with personal growth. Furthermore, the term “pilgrimage” has a religious connotation that might not be accurate for all returning veterans. Although some researchers use “secular pilgrimage” in order to avoid such links with religion (e.g., Walter 1993), that term still implies a search for spiritual experiences, and in many studies, the term “secular” lacks a clear definition (Margry 2008, 30). Lastly, the specific history of the Dutch military presence in former Yugoslavia complicates the analogy with battlefield pilgrimages. In a context of wrongdoing, guilt, and trauma, analogies with pilgrimages are less desirable, and returning to places associated with failure and guilt differs greatly from revisiting those associated with military heroism.

The veteran return trip is motivated by a search for meaning based on the conviction that revisiting and reexperiencing places of memory allow such meaning to be found or constructed. This conviction is rooted in a contemporary belief that travel and tourism generate transformative experiences. Think, for example, about the popularity of “meaningful tourism” (Cohen 2011) or “personal memory tourism” (Marschall 2012), the view that someone’s mental and physical health benefits from traveling (Urry and Larsen 2011), or enthusiasm for exposure therapies to treat anxiety disorders (Jongedijk 2014).

In this article, I analyze the experiences and processes of meaning-making of Dutch veterans who returned to the former Yugoslavia. I argue that returning to the places they were

deployed offers a way to make sense of war memories. Visits to tangible sites of the past provide the clues for redrawing memories and creating new insights. Because the urge to undertake a return trip is rooted in veterans' wartime experiences and public opinion about the mission, I pay ample attention to both.

Returning to Places of Memory

Return trips allow veterans to visit places saturated with memories. Malpas reasons that the places people visit and experience at specific moments in time strongly influence the way they construct an identity (1999, 177). Place and memory are tightly bound (Malpas 1999, 181). Landscapes can be regarded as bearers of the traces of everyone who has been there (Ingold 1993, 152). Particular traces within the landscape evoke memories with people who actively engage in discovering those traces and allocating their meaning. Experiencing a familiar memory-filled landscape can therefore be a form of remembering (Ingold 1993, 153). Remembering through place does not occur only on a cognitive level. Looking at a road in a landscape, for example, might encourage someone to recall the physical activity of walking that road (Ingold 1993, 167). Through an active engagement with familiar landscapes, former inhabitants might discover meaningful memories, both cognitively and bodily. The discovery of meaningful memories could particularly be important for veterans who are traumatized or have difficulty remembering or recounting their wartime experiences.

Returning to personal places of the past is also a way to build on new memories and identities (Marschall 2015, 40). The purpose of revisiting places of memory is therefore twofold: it confronts someone with past memories and selves, and adds new layers to them. Connerton argues that people often need a spatial component to deal with the temporal changes in their lives (2009, 14). Being in a specific place can help visitors to understand the changes that happened in their lives and reflect on the life that lies outside (Connerton 2009, 17). Revisiting places important during a veteran's deployment then also becomes a way to contemplate the time passed since they served. Moreover, "corporeal co-presence" on physical sites associated with (wartime) atrocities could allow for the expression of emotions and social bonding between survivors and their family members (Kidron 2013, 187).

The Dutch Military Involvement in Former Yugoslavia and Its Public Reception

Between 1992 and 2016, approximately 50,000 Dutch men and women were deployed in the former Yugoslavia as part of different UN, NATO, and EU missions, for a period between four and six months.² The UN missions occurred between 1992 and 1995—a period characterized by escalating violence between the different ethnic groups in former Yugoslavia. Soon after the start of the war in the spring of 1992, the area now known as Bosnia-Herzegovina became the main center of tension. The mandate of the UN missions focused on peacekeeping. UN military units were supposed to be a "neutral" party in the conflict, which meant that they could not choose sides or help local citizens. "Neutrality" also implied that the

peacekeepers were lightly armed and that they could only use their weapons when violence was used against them. After the Dayton Peace Treaty of December 1995, NATO took charge over the international missions in the newly founded state of Bosnia-Herzegovina. These missions focused on implementing and stabilizing the military aspects of the Dayton Treaty. The EU missions were a follow up to the NATO missions.

The Dutch participation in the missions has become known for its incapacity to protect the Bosniak refugees in Srebrenica—an “impossible mission” (Klep and Winslow 1999, 117). In July 1995, after weeks of provocations and the withholding of food, weapons, and personnel, the Bosnian-Serb troops of Ratko Mladić attacked the enclave. Over the few days of the attack, weakened Dutch units could not hold their posts, and the refugees were left to their fate. The Dutch military refused to take refugees into their already packed compound, and after Mladić told the Dutch commanding officers he would transport the refugees to a different area without harming them, the Dutch assisted the Bosnian-Serb troops separating Bosniak men and women and placed them in busses. Many of these men were killed during the genocide that followed.

After the fall of the enclave, images of the Dutch military helping Bosnian-Serb troops in Srebrenica went all over the world. In national and international public opinion, the Dutch involvement in former Yugoslavia is linked to cowardice and half-heartedness (Algra, Elands, and Schoeman 2007, 404; Molendijk 2020, 144–45). The negative public reception of the mission is burdensome for the veterans and continues to frustrate them (Molendijk 2020, 146–48). Debates about the complicity of the Dutch government are ongoing, and veterans continue to seek government compensation for their suffering. In the Netherlands, “Srebrenica” has become a national trauma (e.g., Rijdsdijk 2012).

Participants

This study is based on semistructured interviews with 17 male veterans. Eight were professional military of different ranks during their deployment in the former Yugoslavia. Nine interviewees were conscripted soldiers who worked in transport and logistics or as medical support staff. While the conscripts voluntarily signed up for the mission, the professionals could not refuse to participate in the mission—they simply had to go. Six interviewees mentioned suffering from severe psychological complaints after the deployment: four conscripts and two professionals.

The veterans interviewed for the project returned to Bosnia in different forms. Some returned once, others multiple times. For their first return trip, 11 veterans traveled with a good friend, family member, or partner, while 6 others traveled with colleagues. They spent one week in Bosnia on average. Whereas veterans who traveled with colleagues mainly visited war- and mission-related sites, trips with partners or family members also included more holiday-like destinations; veterans, for instance, combined a stay at a Croatian coastal town with trips to Bosnia (Table 1).

Table 1. Overview of Participants

Name	Age	Mission in Bosnia	First Return
Bart	61	2002–2003	Unknown
Bram	70	1997	2000
Daniel	45	1995	2013
David	45	1994	2005
Dennis	46	1995, 1996–1997, 1998	2011
Eddie	62	1994–1995	2013
Erik	43	1995	2017
Frank	42	1995	2008
Jaap	70	1993–1994	2017
Kasper	45	1992–1993	2011
Maarten	42	1994	1996
Marcel	46	1994–1995, 2000	2000
Paul	46	1993	1999
Peter	68	1992–1993, 1996–1997, 1998	2006
Roy	43	1993	2015
Tom	42	1994–1995	2016
Willem	65	1994, 1997, 2002	1998

Most interviewees were deployed between 1993 and 1997, when large UN and NATO army units were stationed in central and east Bosnia. These units consisted of both professional military and conscripted soldiers. In 1996, conscription was suspended indefinitely in the Netherlands. Since that year, the Dutch army consists of professionals only. Today, for many Dutch citizens, the military is an isolated world with strange rules and traditions (Klep 2019). The perceived distance between the army and Dutch citizens and the public image of the Dutch soldiers' cowardice and complicity likely affected the way veterans spoke about their experiences, a distance that must have permeated the interviews, too. As a female researcher without a personal or professional connection to the military, veterans must have regarded me as an outsider. However, the fact that I was not associated with the military may also have caused the interviewees to feel less judged—perhaps reflecting a traditional division of gender roles, in which a female listener composes a male narrative (Broom, Hand, and Tovey 2009). Throughout our interviews, they were in control of the story they wanted to convey.

Individual memories, collective memories, and cultural narratives about the deployment and its aftermath shape the way veterans envision and carry out their return trips.

Narratives function as the mediator between an individual and the world (Wood 1991, 27; Gustavsen 2017, 515). The narratives of the veterans offer insight into the way veterans articulate their memories and experiences within a specific social and cultural context (Ashplant, Dawson, and Roper 2000, 18; Straub 2010, 222). Individual accounts of experiences of war and returns are created within the limits of the memory field (Lomsky-Feder 2004). Therefore, such accounts are never entirely personal but are negotiated with existing explanatory models (Lomsky-Feder 2004, 83).

The interviewees' choice to emphasize certain episodes (and omitting others) within their life stories illustrates the weight the interviewee ascribes to these experiences (Leydesdorff and Adler 2013). I only discussed traumatic memories when the interviewees brought them up, and if an interviewee indicated that he preferred not to speak about a topic, I accepted this without question (Anderson and Jack 1991, 25). The interviews have been analyzed on two levels: first, by focusing on the construction of the life story of the veteran and the connections between the narrated events (Bamberg 2012); and second, by looking at the way the veterans positioned their stories against the collective narrative about the mission and its aftermath.

Recounting War Experiences: Contrast, Dissonance, and Unreality

Veterans clearly located their desire to return to Bosnia in the dissonance and unreality of their wartime experience. Dennis, for example, said:

And then you suddenly stand at the other side. Just further down, and there is the war. And then you think, oh, strange. Very strange. Well, you do that a few times. And every time you leave, and you return [from a mission], you leave a part of yourself there. You return differently. (Dennis, 46)³

Dennis mentions how going back and forth to war zones resulted in estrangement. Every time he crossed the border between war and peace, this left a mark. This account can be regarded as an experience of contrast. These experiences take up a central position in the stories of the veterans. Like Dennis, veterans described their deployment in former Yugoslavia as having changed them, either temporarily or more permanently. This concerns their exposure to an extreme situation like a war, which affects their personality, behavior, emotional responses, or even perspective on life (Lifton 2005; Molendijk, Kramer, and Verweij 2016, 352). Understanding the causes of these changes and dealing with them is difficult, especially with trauma they experienced (Ashplant, Dawson, and Roper 2000).

The difficulty of grasping what war is like is fundamental to the experiences of contrast and dissonance. Take Bart, an officer who served in Bosnia in the early 2000s:

[I've seen] those abandoned villages. There, you really saw nothing, not even a dead dog in the streets. Just abandoned houses, debris. And you'll think, "my god, what happened here?" It's very difficult to imagine that. You only see it. But then you start to relate it to the things we learned during our preparation, and think, "yes, yes, this has happened here." And eh, how do I phrase it... It's incomprehension, real incomprehension. It's not possible to imagine what that's like. And... at the same time you don't want to be bothered by that, because it also moves you. (Bart, 61)

Bart emphasizes his position as an outsider to the war. He is a witness to the consequences of a conflict between others, a pair of eyes. His knowledge of the events that took place—in particular the genocide—helps him to create an image of what happened, but instead of pulling him closer to the events, it only causes greater incomprehension. Meanwhile, Bart illustrates the ambivalence between the urge to think about what happened and the need to

stay away from his emotions to be able to perform his job. This gap underlines the dissonance he experienced between simultaneously wanting and not wanting to engage with the conflict, a dissonance that cannot be separated from the aftermath and negative reception of Dutch military involvement in the former Yugoslavia.

Veterans often used the term “unreal” when recounting their deployment, for instance when describing their compound. For some, the base felt like “an inverted prison, designed to keep people out,” while others characterized it as “*Center Parcs* (a resort) surrounded by barbed wire.” These descriptions alluded to the dissonance they felt between the outside world—the war—and the relatively safe space of the compound. Veterans who frequently had to cross the border between the safer areas in Croatia and the warzones in Bosnia mention a similar contrast. Whereas Croatia felt like a “holiday,” complete with beaches and nights spent in hotels, they associated Bosnia with danger, violence, and unpredictability.

Veterans also used “unreal” to describe encounters with the landscape, and mentioned the difficulties they had simultaneously experiencing the beauty of nature and the ugliness of war, a common trope in war narratives (Fussell 1975). Erik explains:

You know, we always drove around eh... a lake. Lake Prozor. (...) And there you have a view... and you're enjoying it... You're sitting there with your flak jacket and your helmet and your gun, taking into account everything that can go wrong, and you're enjoying the view. That is why I... that contrast... (Erik, 43)

For Erik, questions about the contrast between nature and war and the truthfulness of his memories were in the front of his mind and one reason to return to Bosnia. Daniel, another conscript, shared that the incompatibility of nature and violence kept captivating him once he returned to the Netherlands. His remark signaled the moral conflicts Daniel experienced. He struggled with the desire to recall wartime memories. His description of the incompatibility between nature and extreme violence illustrated his struggle:

I used to look at online videos of people being executed. Because I then... I showed them to my wife and asked her, "what do you see on this video?" And she would reply with, yes, I see people being shot, terrible. And I would ask her, "but don't you hear that the birds are singing, isn't that strange, that that just continues?" She wasn't looking at that at all, but I was at those times very much in to you know, how the nature smelled there, and how it sounded... yes... you try to awaken a certain feeling... (Daniel, 45)

A contrast particular to the mission in former Yugoslavia is the one between the desire to act and the experience of powerlessness, especially during the UN missions. Powerlessness, for instance, runs through the account of Jaap, who was stationed as an observer in besieged Sarajevo. Jaap's daily job was to register the number of bombs, shelling, and artillery fires. His story was loaded with frustration and fear, caused by the inability to act in a meaningful way and the double feelings pertaining to his relatively comfortable position in a UN observation post:

It was winter, yes, that made you feel schizophrenic, because despite the fact that there were tensions, it wasn't your war, and you had enough food, clothes, a place to sleep, a warm car... and you'd drive through the town [of Sarajevo] and old ladies walked around carrying a bunch of wood on their back. Yes. But you weren't allowed to help them. No. I really didn't like that, it was very exasperating. (Jaap, 70)

For many veterans, the experience of powerlessness has resulted in anger with the UN and the Dutch government. This anger is rooted in the Dutch government's framing of the UN mission in former Yugoslavia as being safe, nonviolent, and purposeful, though the reality was much bleaker. Veterans felt trapped in a dangerous situation, while not being allowed to act accordingly. David, for example, was a conscript who drove an ambulance:

They told everyone, the UN is impartial, nothing will happen to them. (..) But stuff did happen, because if you drive around in a green area and you have a white car, you're an easy target, and then that red cross on your car suddenly had a hole in it, because they tried to shoot at you, albeit just for the fun of practicing. (David, 45)

David felt endangered because of the specific mandate governing his work: his "neutral" white ambulance attracted gunfire instead of repelling it. Experiences like these enlarged his mistrust of the UN and the aims of the mission. The contrast between feeling unprotected while having to pursue an unachievable goal runs through the accounts of the UN veterans. By not matching expectations and reality, by feeling lured into an impossible mission, and by being confronted with powerlessness, they struggled to assign meaning to the deployment (e.g., Lifton 2005, 39).

The negative public reception and media coverage of the mission to former Yugoslavia reinforced the powerlessness veterans experienced, as they confronted national judgment that was difficult to refute. Marcel, a noncommissioned officer who served in Bosnia twice, experienced a contrast between his personal memories and the collective narrative in the Netherlands:

For years, I have never spoken about the fact that I have been there, although I feel proud about the things we achieved. We worked around the clock under precarious conditions. But the term Srebrenica is so loaded, everyone immediately associates it with a black page in the history of Dutch defense, or assumes that the Dutch are responsible for the slaughter of 8000 men. I can, of course, mention that I wasn't there at that moment, but the image is very persistent... (Marcel, 46)

Like Marcel, many interviewees could not talk about the deployment. Their time in the former Yugoslavia provokes feelings of shame, aversion, distrust, and powerlessness—even when their personal experiences were positive. Additionally, because of the ongoing focus of politicians and the media on Srebrenica, veterans who participated in other missions feel ignored. Here, the incongruity between personal memories and the negative image of the mission in the Netherlands has restricted veterans' public and private articulations of their wartime experiences and prevented them from regarding their deployment as a rewarding experience (Schok, Kleber, and Boeije 2010, 297).

Experiences of contrast, dissonance, and unreality affect the way veterans recount their memories of war. Their accounts revolve around feelings of estrangement, powerlessness, frustration, and misunderstanding caused by both the general characteristics of war and the particular features of the mission to former Yugoslavia and its aftermath. The impossibility of comprehending what a war is like gives rise to questions about the deployment that are difficult to answer when they returned home. This incomprehension keeps the mythical status of war experiences intact and gives rise to moral conflicts. One way to find answers is to return to the places related to a mission.

Processing Memories During Return Trips

When asked about their motives to return to the places they deployed to in the former Yugoslavia, the word that most veterans immediately mentioned was “curiosity”; curiosity to see places with their own eyes, to discover whether the region has improved, or to look for answers to personal questions. Often, their curiosity developed over the decades after the deployment and was influenced by (online) stories of veterans who had already returned. Curiosity was a way they distinguished their motives from emotions like nostalgia. As Willem, a retired officer, explains:

I think the main reason for me to return was curiosity, what it looks like now, what has become of it 20 years later. (...) Just visiting the places where I've been to, eh, yes, go back in time. But I wasn't motivated by, eh, nostalgia, it was just curiosity, I didn't want to go back there because I've suffered some kind of trauma, no, absolutely not. (Willem, 65)

Like Willem, other interviewees emphasized that for them, the urge to return was merely a case of curiosity and nothing else. In this way, they rejected the stereotype of the traumatized veteran and instead focused on their personal interests (Gustavsen 2017). Still, veterans who rely on the term “curiosity” often also mentioned that they felt they had felt alienated after their return to the Netherlands, caused by the impossibility to talk about their deployment at home, a lost sense of comradeship, and, among the conscripted soldiers, a loss of their military identity. They yearned for a time “when life was different,” which could be an expression of nostalgia (Iles 2006, 175). Some even described their first return trip as an experience of “coming home.” Their use of the term “curiosity,” then, should be seen as a way to express their reasons for undertaking a return trip without evoking terms that have negative connotations in military circles, such as “nostalgia,” other painful emotions, or feelings of guilt.

Most veterans reflected on their return trip as an experience that had mitigated their worries and mission-related complaints. Daniel, however, was more ambivalent:

It was good to go back because I had so many questions. Like, what will it do to me? Will it do something with me in positive or negative sense? (...) Well I went back, and I visited all the places I had been, but actually it didn't do as much with me as I expected. Not the smells, not the colors (...) But I have realized that ever since I went there, I don't think about it as often as I used to do. In the beginning I was really stuck in that world,

in that atmosphere. I wanted to stick to that, watching videos, photos... And recollect memories, keep them, like, oh, what if I lose them... (Daniel, 45)

Even though Daniel's expectations did not match his experiences on the ground, he considered the return trip helpful, not because he relived his memories, but because going back caused him to be *less* absorbed by them. Being confronted with the fact that the area was not as alluring as he had imagined helped him to normalize his ideas about what Bosnia was like.

Disappointment came up in various interviews. This disappointment was predominantly caused by familiar sites' changing since the war. The disappointment was evident even for veterans who returned soon after their deployment: Maarten, a conscript, traveled to Bosnia in 1996, two years after his service. Although his return trip was military in character—he could use his military permit and sleep at NATO compounds—he was disappointed that familiar places did not look the same. This type of disappointment could also be seen as an expression of nostalgia, of longing for different times.

The sites veterans visit on their return trip were not only connected to happy memories. Various interviewees were confronted with violence during their deployment. For them, returning to places related to that violence was not a case of longing for the past, but rather a means to heal traumatic memories. Eddie, a noncommissioned officer, explained how he visited the site where he experienced gunfire:

I visited the place where I have been shot in December '94. It was quite a heavy day. Almost nothing has changed there, only the vegetation has returned. When we approached it, I immediately recognized the spot, stopped the car, and said "here it is." The memory was completely intact. (...) You see everything passing by in flashes. I spent two hours sitting on a little bench there, just like, eh, letting it go. But because of that I have been able to leave a part there. I have been there. It's good. (Eddie, 62)

Eddie's visit to the spot where he had been shot helped him to work through his memories of a traumatic event. As is the case with more interviewees who suffered from psychological complaints related to their deployment, Eddie's trip worked as a voluntary final step in his medical treatment. Going back to the site of the trauma functioned to contextualize traumatic memories and fill the gaps in his memories of the event, by observing, smelling, and listening to the surroundings.

The fear and violence that the veterans encountered during deployment were not always connected to one specific site, route, or area but also concerned the overall experiences of a mission. Visits to more general sites of war can also trigger emotions and provide relief. Jaap, a former officer, told how he and his travel companions went to the Tunnel Museum in Sarajevo (the secret underground connection between the besieged capital and the outer world), dedicated to the memory of the blockade:

[The group] went into a room to watch a video. (..) So I stood there at the door, and watched those images, and well, I cried like a baby. Really. But after we did that, I thought,

you know, I think I have gotten rid of it. I can now speak about it in a normal manner, yes. So, I'm really happy that I went there. (Jaap, 70)

Places like the Tunnel Museum narrate the story of the war in Bosnia, in whole or in parts. Yet, they do more than that: they also function as a place for commemoration, and, in the case of the Tunnel Museum, are a symbol for hope and resistance during the siege of Sarajevo. For some of the returnees, like Jaap, visiting such symbolic places helped to work through the past.

All interviewees were positive about their return trips. Some described it as a real breakthrough that helped them to alleviate their complaints. Others saw it as a means to process memories or respond to their own curiosity. Visits to physical places help to confirm the validity of memories, fill in memory gaps, or temporarily delve into a sense of the past. Meanwhile, unmet expectations also caused disappointment with a few of the Dutch veterans. Visits to places connected to traumatic memories support coming to terms with the past, like Eddie, who returned to the site where he was shot during the war. For him, bodily and sensorial encounters with places of memory assisted in contextualizing feelings of fear and anxiety and in getting access to a more complete story about the war. These visits work not only for sites directly connected to personal memories but also apply to more general remnants and representations of war.

Creating New Stories and Insights

Experiencing a war leaves its traces, and veterans report that they came back from their deployment as different people. As the interviews suggested, returning to the site of a mission is a way to better understand the reasons that each felt a changed person. Still, for many veterans, this search for answers was not only related to personal questions about the deployment. For them, going back helped to show others what had caused them to change and helped them to fill in the stories about the veterans that they could not easily articulate. Dennis told how he wants his family to join him to Bosnia:

You know, I went through a lot of misery afterwards. Divorce and stuff like that. That does something with you. And they all had to witness that. And yes, then I think, I want to show you the cause for this. You know, where I have been and how it is there. You know, just the smell, the nature, the people... (Dennis, 46)

Dennis suggests that witnessing and encountering physical sites of the mission provides his family with insight into his behavior after having returned to the Netherlands, and might help them to understand the hardship he caused and experienced after the war. For Bart, who returned to Bosnia multiple times, a search for recognition also played a role in his choice to take friends and family with him to Bosnia. As he explained: "Yes, yes, I don't know... I don't know how I can explain this... it eh... has to do with uh... yes recognition I think. Like eh... I have seen this. And this is what it does to me. Actually, more like... I hope you can understand me now" (Bart, 61). Bart's search for recognition is related to his urge to be

understood by the people closest to him; by joining him on a return trip, he believes that he will gain their recognition and validation of his experiences of the war.

This search for recognition must be related analytically to the critical public reception of Dutch military involvement in the former Yugoslavia, although Bart does not mention that explicitly. The idea that family and friends who did not serve cannot imagine what war must be like, and therefore they cannot understand what the experience of war had done to veterans, was mentioned by many other interviewees. By taking family and friends along on return trips and by physically experiencing places connected to their deployment, veterans felt more entitled to open up about their wartime experiences.

During the return trips, veterans not only aimed to open up toward relatives, but also toward local people. Many veterans mentioned the desire to meet locals as one reason to go back. Sometimes, this desire was connected to the fact that during the mission, military personnel could not have much contact with local people, unless their job required it. Many interviewees reported feeling proud to have met Bosnian people on their return trips. Being recognized by local people, for instance, seemed to please Dennis:

We were driving around [in the area], and a man says, please stop. (..) So we stop, and he asks what we were doing there. So I exit the car and tell him that I'd like to have a look at the compound. Well, he looks at me, and says: "Operator." Woosssssh [makes sound]. He recognized me. [laughs]. (Dennis, 46)

For some veterans, the desire to meet local people relates to the desire to learn about the general attitude of the Bosnians toward the Dutch. Tom, who served as a conscript in Srebrenica but returned to the Netherlands before the fall of the enclave, explained how his motive to return to Bosnia was related to feelings of guilt and shame, echoing the Dutch collective narrative:

Just like... we have been there... but we didn't do anything... in my eyes, in my experience... almost nothing. Or at least too little. We left them... (..) And for me it is also a feeling of guilt. And shame. Like, eh, you know, I go back. To talk with the people there. See how they see us. How they think about us. I had very negative thoughts about that. But [I now know] that people feel more or less happy about our presence. Which has removed a part of those feelings of guilt and shame. (Tom, 44)

Veterans experience the attitude of the locals toward them as being less judgmental than they expected, which brings them relief. Frank tells how meeting local people sometimes provokes initial suspicion. He and his former colleagues, for example, spoke to a waitress in a bar:

She was curious and asked us where we were from. We told her, we are Dutch and are participating in the Marš Mira [the yearly peach march to Srebrenica]. (..) She asked why, and one of the boys told her: '95. Well, she then started to rage, and went crazy, and it's your fault, and this, and that, and ultimately it became quieter, and there we are sitting together, and we started listening to each other's stories (..) We returned in the evening and had a great night, food, drinks, talk, everything at ease. (Frank, 42)

For some veterans, meeting local people even entailed encountering former adversaries. David, the ambulance driver, reported that he and his brother met a man close to the place where his brother served:

That guy tells us like, yes, those mountains there, that was where I was during the war. And we were like, okay, (..) he was the bastard who was firing cannon shots over our heads. And he was smirking like, yes, that's correct. And those are really special things, because it makes the stories so extremely personal, but also extremely close-by. It confronts, and it shocks a bit, but it also very quickly gives a kind of safety and joy, because a guy like that has also continued with his life, and is making jokes about it. (..) You know, I've found more peace because of the moderateness that people there approached me with, than because of any medication I've ever taken. (David, 45)

For David, meeting former adversaries was an incentive to continue his own life without feeling too restrained by his war experiences. By getting to know people who had gone through severe hardship, he could better put his experiences in perspective.

David explicitly labels the different phases he went through as a returnee. Where he used his first return to Bosnia to confront himself with his memories and kick-off therapy, he describes his consequent return trips—undertaken after the treatment—as a way to meet local people and gain more in-depth knowledge:

[During my first return in 2005], I stood on Sniper Alley [Sarajevo's infamous main street] with a heavy heart. It was really difficult for me to see the holes in the street. It was shitty that some things were still not restored. (..) But comparing the image I had of the war period with the contemporary one also helped me to put things in perspective, to have things settle down, and to follow my own route in the process of working through the past. [Due to that] in 2012 I could go more in-depth, talk with locals, and yes, it's very comforting if someone says, you know, you did what you could. It wasn't enough, but other people weren't there, while you were. And now you even have returned, which shows your dedication. (David, 45)

Like David, other interviewees also returned to Bosnia multiple times. What started as a personal search for familiar places, memories, and comfort for many gradually developed into an interest in the area and its history. David changed from someone who wanted to go back to come to terms with his own past into someone who now assists other veterans on their return trips.

Frank described his multiple visits to Srebrenica as a way to continue his participation in the conflict:

For myself, I'm something like, in '95 a lot of things happened, and reflecting on the moments that I have been back, I have experienced all those things once again. Then, men fled, were killed, and ended up in mass graves. I've been to a mass grave that was just located. I joined the commemoration. I held the coffins in my hands, and it might sound a bit weird, but, how can I say it, I was part of history then, and now I'm part of that same history by carrying those coffins to their final places. (Frank, 42)

Frank's yearly returns to Bosnia are a way to stay involved with the area and continue his story there. By meeting and speaking to people in the region, he attempted to widen his scope and learn more about the war. Kasper, who worked on military communications in besieged Sarajevo, also regarded his many returns as a way to learn about the war from local people. He contrasts his past absence of interest in the area to his current enthusiasm:

[During the war] we literally said to each other, build some walls around [the conflict area], put a roof on it, and have them sort it out themselves. I'm not going to get shot because of them. Only when I returned to Bosnia was I able to nuance this image. You'll see what other people went through during war, (..) and you'll get to know many different perspectives. That is very valuable to me. (Kasper, 45)

About half of the interviewees got involved in volunteer work in Bosnia. The form of this volunteer work varies: from individual initiatives to assist other returning veterans, to projects in which groups of veterans work together, for example, renovating public facilities. The interviewees described their urge to do volunteer work to be of significance. However, Kasper is the only volunteering veteran who explicitly linked the opportunity to volunteer to the specific features of the mission and the powerlessness he experienced. The other veterans described their decision to participate in volunteer work rather as a practical choice: because of their knowledge of the country and the relative proximity of Bosnia to the Netherlands, they considered themselves capable of doing volunteer work or helping specific people. Paul (46), who organizes volunteer projects for veterans, for instance, explained that, "we choose former war areas... and eh... we choose Bosnia just because it's is close-by." Therefore, as with the use of the term "curiosity," for some of the veterans, evasive language seemed to indicate that taboos still circulated around admitting feelings of guilt or moral injuries.

Getting a better understanding of the conflict—through volunteer work or by meeting local people—does not necessarily result in developing an optimistic view on the country. Where veterans initially hoped to witness peace and progress, and in that find proof of their own contribution to the region, the current political situation in particularly the Bosnian-Serb Republika Srpska [where Srebrenica is located] is not reassuring. Ethnonationalist tensions and genocide denial are part of daily life for many Bosnians. When talking to local people, veterans learned about these tensions, and adjusted their hopes for the country. For example, Dennis:

I only had terrible images of Sarajevo. And now you are nicely having dinner in the center of the city. Then you'll think: you see, it is possible. But yeah, then you'll talk to the girl that picked us up, who tells you that the reality is a bit different... (Dennis, 46)

Although awareness of existing ethnonationalist tensions initially can be disheartening, veterans get over their first disappointment rather quickly. By learning about regional politics and conflicts, they can update their knowledge of the country and the conflict. They initially entertained two extreme and conflicting perspectives: one of Bosnia as a country of ongoing war, based on past experiences, and the other of Bosnia as a country of beauty and progress, based on an outsider's hopes and desires. They emerge from their encounter with a new story that is sobering, but also more nuanced, realistic, and believable. Being able to construct a

narrative based on personal observations and interactions with locals contributes to developing a grounded opinion of the country and rewrites older understandings. Meanwhile, developing insight into the current political situation in Bosnia can produce frustration and anger. Yet, most veterans seem to prefer this sobering perspective to their prior uninformed optimism.

Still, this emerging perspective produces new tensions. Family members sometimes regard a veteran's persistent involvement with Bosnia as an unhealthy obsession. This concern was the case for Frank:

S: Have you ever taken your family along on a return trip, or not yet?

F: No, that is some point of discussion in our house. Bosnia takes up too much... yes... how should I phrase it...

S: It takes up space?

F: Yes, space, indeed, that is a good description, yes, in our family. For a long time, this has been kind of a battle. People⁴ didn't understand why [I'd] still bother with [the mission], despite the fact that it happened. Why not let it go, try to move on, and yes, that is obviously easier said than done... (Frank, 42)

Sometimes, participating in a return trip is burdensome for partners. Officer Willem reported that his return trip did not go as planned:

W: We stopped halfway. (...) After visiting Srebrenica, we drove to Austria as soon as possible, and spent a week there (...).

S: Why was that?

W: Well, I'm of course used to it, but my wife really didn't like seeing all the war damage that is still visible... (Willem, 65)

A few veterans reported similar experiences, and their return trips were not finished or the planned route was changed. These experiences suggest that, although all the veterans themselves regarded their return trips as positive, some partners and family members were reluctant or refused to participate. Therefore, these aborted trips and changed itineraries demonstrate that these sites are not simply of no interest, but are upsetting to the veterans' partners and loved ones, even those who initially agree to accompany them on return. Although I did not interview their partners, the frequency of these trips being disrupted suggests that the return trips are not necessarily therapeutic for others, and might in some cases even be actively disconcerting or upsetting.

During their return trips, veterans open up their perspective on the country and the conflict. From an initial introspective scope, which focuses on reconciling individual memories and answering personal questions about the contrasts or dissonance they experienced, they moved to a next phase of directing their view outward. This new phase enables veterans to

recount their wartime experiences to friends and family members and show others the reasons for the changes the veterans went through after returning from deployment. By meeting local people and former adversaries, veterans learn about the experiences of others and enhance their knowledge of the Bosnian war and the current tensions. By engaging in volunteer work, veterans get involved with the country and work on smaller or larger projects. Years after the deployment, veterans are able to contribute to the lives of Bosnian citizens.

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that the incentive to return can be found in the difficulties that veterans have in assigning meaning to their deployment in former Yugoslavia. Wartime experiences of contrast, dissonance, and unreality hamper veterans to create a coherent and credible account of their service. The condemning (inter)national collective narrative about the Dutch presence in former Yugoslavia has intensified feelings of alienation and incomprehension. This alienation causes veterans to remain silent after they return home (Molendijk 2020). Preexisting cultural narratives help compose a veterans' story about a war and help to make sense of war experiences. But when those narratives are unfitting or absent—as seems to be the case with the veterans I interviewed—constructing a personal story about the war becomes difficult, and they fail to assign meaning to wartime experiences (Ashplant, Dawson, and Roper 2000, 19). In the Netherlands, the public opinion about the missions, the media's focus on scandals, and the political attention solely on Srebrenica has further silenced the veterans. Because of this narrow public discussion, veterans remain stuck with their memories of the deployment and worries over their role in the conflict.

Returning to former places of deployment offers a way for veterans to build a new story about war experiences and find sense in them. The creation of such an updated personal narrative of the deployment proceeds through three different phases. The first phase has an introspective character, in which returning veterans focus on personal memories about the period of the deployment, by driving familiar routes, visiting the former compounds, and reacquainting with local people. Visits to tangible sites of the past are thought to provide the clues in redrawing memories and filling in existing gaps. Bodily and sensorial experiences take up an important position, especially when processing traumatic memories. The combination of cognitive, bodily, and sensorial experiences that occur during the return trip seems crucial in making sense of memories—emotions or experiences that cannot be understood rationally can but put into motion by physical encounters with personal places of memory. The analysis showed that revisiting general places of collective memory also allowed for emotional discharge. Here, we see how collective *lieux de mémoire* can also contribute to an individual's attempt to process the past—even when the personal war experiences of veterans are only loosely connected to the events commemorated by such collective places of memory.

The second phase involves a more outward directed perspective, where veterans open up to others: family members, friends, local people, and sometimes even former adversaries. These encounters assist in verbalizing the updated personal narrative of the deployment and its

emotional impact on the veteran after returning from service. Articulating the newly created stories and memories helps in gaining recognition for past suffering and incomprehension. Physical confrontations with Bosnian places confirm the veracity of personal memories. Veterans who feel misunderstood at home use visits to physical sites in Bosnia to validate their stories to family and friends. The outward perspective also encourages veterans to develop interest in the stories of others, in getting to know different sides of the conflict and in understanding the past and present conflicts in the region. Last, the development of such an outward perspective also seems to instigate a desire to help others: either through volunteer work or by assisting veterans who return for the first time. The pace and transitions between the different phases vary for individual veterans, with some never progress beyond the first phase.

This research raises two issues. First, articulating new stories about wartime memories can be regarded as a way to transfer personal memories into a story that can be shared with a larger group (Ashplant, Dawson, and Roper 2000, 20). Such a group influences the way veterans experience and recount the return trip. Returning is therefore a “social memory practice” (Marschall 2016, 6). As such, the story of the returning veteran becomes a cultural script—a script written with the assumed value of returning to personal places of memory in mind. Although veterans travel in different forms and visit different places in Bosnia, their reflections on the benefits of the return trip are similar. Here, we can see the impact of current convictions about the benefits of meaningful memory tourism and how confrontations with bleak episodes of one’s past can alleviate mental suffering. Still, deviant experiences of returning, especially the ones that worsened a veteran’s suffering, might not be articulated. Nevertheless, returning to Bosnia allows many veterans to dissociate from the stigmas that exist about Dutch involvement in the military missions to former Yugoslavia and Bosnia.

Second, visiting places of personal memory is meaningful for individual veterans, in particular for the ones who seek to ease traumatic memories and moral injuries. Still, visits to Bosnian sites that are less associated with personal memory can also be of value for returning veterans. Places that represent the Bosnian wars in a more general way also invite veterans to discharge, contemplate, and build on their story. Those *lieux de mémoire* provide the spatial components often needed for reflection (Connerton 2009). Places function as the conductors that assist in working through the past. Likewise, the experience of being in a familiar landscape already brings veterans back to their mission and encourages them to cope with disturbing memories of the deployment. Thus, although memory and place are closely connected, the search for a confrontation with wartime experiences is not limited to visiting personal places of the mission only. Rather, the dedication to spend time in Bosnia, to recall the past, and engage with the landscape and its inhabitants helps veterans to commit to reflecting on their military involvement in Bosnia and the continuing emotional impact of experiencing war.

Notes

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1. The official number of deaths given by the Potočari Memorial Centre is 8372, but is much debated (Toom 2020). The count of 8,372 includes refugees who died from illness or exhaustion on their attempt to escape Srebrenica. An estimated 1,000 bodies remain to be found and buried.
2. Data Dutch Veterans Institute: <https://www.nlveteraneninstituut.nl/missie/voormalig-joegoslavie/>.
3. All quotes have been translated by the author.
4. Frank uses “people” instead of “she” in order to refer to his wife, thereby emphasizing the distance between the two of them on this topic.

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