

Guest Column

Dutch Defence Ministry keeps stumbling

Jeroen Stam

This article was first published in Dutch, on www.novini.nl – August 25th, 2018.

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Not many ministries in The Netherlands can boast as many blunders as the Ministry of Defence. The department is under a, seemingly, never ending siege. Even setting things right seems to fail constantly.

Substandard food quality in army canteens, a debatable change of command at Eindhoven Air Base, a navy diver who perished on Curaçao, corrupt fleet managers, two soldiers killed in Mali due to faulty equipment, a sexual harassment case at a military base and a fatal accident on the Ossendrecht shooting range.

It is but a modest enumeration of scandals within the Dutch Armed Forces over the past few years. Minister Jeanine Hennis and Chief of Defence Tom Middendorp were compelled to resign in October last year. Hennis was re-hired by the Ministry of Defence (MOD) shortly thereafter, as a lieutenant colonel. Middendorp became aide-de-camp to King Willem-Alexander, for 'services rendered'.

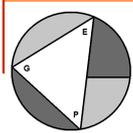
Everybody makes mistakes—making amends however, is key. The MOD even fails there. Having received the pink slip, a regular employee, responsible for a swath of mistakes and unable to set things right, will as a rule not be hired by any comparable company. Let alone be re-hired by his or her former employer.

It is not quite a recent development, let alone incidental—the inadequate handling of accidents and scandals. The carcinogenic dangers of chromium trioxide were already known in 1973, according to the Institute for Public Health and the Environment. Survivors and surviving relatives of the airplane crash in the Irish Sea in 1981 declared late last year that the Ministry still had not coped with the disaster satisfactorily. And Srebrenica veterans still feel left out in the cold, two decades on.

Fairy tale

The Srebrenica massacre is, beyond doubt, one of the most tragic episodes in the Dutch Armed Forces' history. The Muslim enclave in former Yugoslavia was supposed to be protected by Dutchbat troops, when, on July 11th 1995, it was overrun by the Serbian troops of general Mladić. Consequently, the largest war crime on European soil since World War II was perpetrated. The death toll of the genocide amounted to about 8,000 casualties. An ill-defined mandate, flawed preparation and insufficient weaponry—these are but a few of the reasons the mission failed. It became a national trauma in the Netherlands.

Veteran Remko de Bruijne was there, in 1995, serving as a private 1st class: "For weeks we had been aware the enclave would fall. Every day we would report troop movements from Serbia



to Srebrenica. The Serbian government claimed these were nothing but exercise manoeuvres. I was 20 at the time, just out of training, but in my opinion this fairy tale seemed rather far-fetched. Exercises during wartime? War isn't exactly an exercise, now is it? The troop movements were referred to our operations room in Potočari and they reported it all to the higher echelons in Zagreb. Unfortunately nothing was done about it and we all know how it ended."

Amidst the raging hostilities, operational conditions on the Dutchbat base were far from ideal. 'Near our compound there were heaps of white asbestos, out in the open', recounts De Bruijne. "After a shower of rain it was washed all over the terrain. We were ordered to clean it up, without any protective clothing—I still have pictures of this. Also, there was a barrel with nuclear radiation emanating from it. An official document stated the MOD didn't want personnel and the home front 'to worry about this particular fact'."

Sceptical

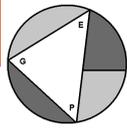
Time and again news emerges regarding the controversial way in which the MOD has handled the aftermath of the tragedy. De Bruijne: "Minister Hennis, Prime Minister Rutte and Chief of Defence Middelburg attended a Dutchbat III meeting in 2014. They made all kinds of promises, concerning rehabilitation and psychological assistance. It all amounted to zilch. I am rather sceptical when it comes to the promises made by the MOD and the powers that be, as are countless Dutchbat veterans. For the past 14 years I have been engaged in legal battles with the Ministry. I have encountered obstruction, false promises and all kinds of procedural tricks."

The MOD says in a statement: "Members of Dutchbat have experienced a most difficult time and some among them, sadly, have subsequently suffered afflictions. The Ministry offers care and support: There are services for which they can apply. Also, veterans have been able to make use of the 'debt of honour'-settlement. Any veteran experiencing residual damage can contact us. We will look into cases individually and as speedily as possible."

De Bruijne is not impressed: "Of course one can ask for support, however, in practice all requests will be rejected. You have to undergo several examinations by MOD medical staff and they of course aren't exactly keen on making way for financial compensation." In addition, the ex-soldier noticed the Ministry has lost significant data regarding the fall of the enclave: "The Srebrenica work order: Gone. Documentation with reference to graves on the compound: Lost. The infamous film roll [made and handed in by Dutchbat-lieutenant Ron Rutten that reportedly showed Serb war crimes. Ed.]: Destroyed." Minister Bijleveld denies the latter: "The MOD has not withheld any footage. All photographic evidence has been handed over to the Yugoslav Tribunal and the Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies, which published the report Srebrenica: a 'safe' area in 2002."

Discredited

According to author Edwin F. Giltay, Bijleveld's response is not convincing. "The sources mentioned in my book *The Cover-up General* have made a credible case to the contrary. They



assert footage has actually been withheld.” His non-fiction thriller was prohibited by the courts in 2015, in a case instigated by a former MOD-employee who claimed the facts were made-up.

When asked, Minister Bijleveld declares: “In the book fact and fiction are indeed intertwined.” Nevertheless: The Court of Appeal in The Hague overturned the book ban, resolutely. It ruled its accuracy is not in doubt. “I do not have any views on that,” says Bijleveld.

In the past, Mr Giltay has been branded as ‘completely loopy’ in an official report made public by the MOD. The incumbent Minister denies endorsing the report: “The MOD has never spoken about Mr Giltay in this fashion.” The document, however, has never been recounted and is still publicly available.

Having been discredited by the Ministry is one thing—Giltay thinks there are bigger fish to fry: The covering up of the truth about Srebrenica. “The Ministry never quite developed admitting mistakes. Unlike certain film rolls.” De Bruijne adds: “They prefer to keep everything under wraps, lest damages claims will ensue. Neither justice nor truth are relevant to them.”

Jeroen Stam (45) is a freelance author from The Hague. He has taken a keen interest in the Srebrenica aftermath and has published about the subject on news website Novini.