

Ladies en gentlemen,

My name is Angelien Eijsink. I am a Member of Parliament for the Dutch Labour Party. For my party, I am the spokesperson for Defence. And for me, this portfolio includes not only policy, capabilities and hardware, but more so the soldiers, the men and women who make up the armed forces and who are devoted to protect everything that our society holds dear. More so, I have taken an interest in the men and women who have in the past served our country's interests in the most challenging situations: Our veterans.

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Throughout history, people in The Netherlands have never regarded the military as an important part of our society. As a country of tradesmen, we have of old had a critical attitude towards anything that costs money without a good return on investment. As a result, our armed forces were often regarded as a burden and our soldiers and veterans did not enjoy a special position in our society.

However, starting with the conflict in former Yugoslavia, it became more and more apparent that the military had an important part to play in safeguarding or restoring peace and stability all over the world. And thereby serving the interest of our country and the world community at large.

Although generally referred to as Peace Keeping Operations or Reconstruction Missions, the missions that our soldiers participate in, can be very demanding and sometimes involve severe risks.

Throughout the years, we have been confronted not only with soldiers who laid down their lives in the service of their country, but also with soldiers who returned with severe injuries, both physical and psychological. The psychological injuries sometimes not becoming apparent until many years after deployment, but no less disabling than physical injuries.

This made me aware that as politicians who decide upon the deployment of our armed forces, we carry a grave responsibility. It is us, the politicians who take the decision to send our young men and women into demanding and often perilous situations. Therefore, I feel that as politicians we also have a responsibility to show them that we appreciate their efforts and I feel that we have a responsibility to make sure they are being provided with appropriate care if and when their experiences have an impeding impact on their well-being.

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This feeling of responsibility led me to ask for a law that would guarantee the recognition of the veterans' contribution to our society and safeguard proper care for those who suffered injuries as a result. At first, the government was not forthcoming to make such a law. Therefore, I exercised my prerogative as a Member of Parliament to initiate a law myself. Consequently, the Minister of Defence decided to cooperate and in 2012 our Veterans Law was established.

In this Veterans Law, we have laid down our definition of a veteran. Whereas in some countries everyone who has served as a soldier is given the status of veteran, in The Netherlands this is restricted to soldiers who have served in wartime situations. This can include service in Peacekeeping Operations or comparable missions. Also, in The Netherlands a soldier is considered a veteran the moment he has served in such a mission and not only after he leaves the armed forces. Therefore we have both soldiers on active duty and former soldiers who enjoy the status of veteran.

Next, our Veterans Law lays down the obligation for the Minister of Defence to pursue a policy aimed at promoting public recognition and appreciation of our veterans. Such recognition and appreciation starts with the government, but ultimately our veterans should experience them in daily life. Respect for veterans should become as normal in our society as support for our Olympic team.

And in the past years we have come a long way towards establishing that goal. The most prominent manifestation of recognition and appreciation being the annual Veterans Day which takes place around the Houses of Parliament in The Hague, in the presence of His Majesty the King, the Prime Minister, Minister of Defence and a large number of parliamentarians and other prominent members of society. The major event during that day is the veterans' parade for the King, which is broadcast live on national television.

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A major part of our Veterans Law stipulates the obligation to provide proper care for our veterans.

That care starts before the soldiers are sent out on a mission. The best way to minimize casualties, is a thorough preparation of the soldiers. The law stipulates the obligation to properly select and prepare the soldiers for their mission.

Also, the obligation to inform and prepare the families of the soldiers is laid down in the law: We recognize that a soldier is dependent upon his family and that the soldiers' mission has a significant impact on the family. Much more so when the soldier lays down his life or returns with severe injuries. Therefore, both the soldiers and their families must be informed on the health hazards of the mission and on the care that will be available to them.

The law also requires the Minister of Defence to make arrangements for the care and support of soldiers and their families during the mission.

When the soldiers return from their mission, the mission is not yet over. Experiences in many countries have taught us that soldiers have to re-adapt to a normal peacetime situation. Also, both soldiers and their families have to re-integrate after a period of living separate and vastly different lives. Our Veterans Law stipulates that the Minister of Defence should make arrangements for the monitoring and coaching of that adaptation and re-integration. This monitoring and coaching should also serve as an early warning-system for problems, so that social or psychological care can be provided in an early stage thereby preventing chronic or more serious problems.

And in case the soldier returns with severe injuries or develops major problems afterwards, the law stipulates the obligation to provide special care for veterans and their families. This special care comes on top of the already excellent social and health care that all citizens of our country enjoy.

The special care for veterans contains health care and rehabilitation but also special material support in case of disabilities, like necessary adaptations to their houses, transport, prosthetics, etcetera. Also,

immaterial care will be provided such as social and psychological care.

As part of the care for injured veterans, the law recognizes that their injuries can lead to loss of employment or – even worse- the loss of the ability to provide for oneself. Therefore, the law establishes the obligation to provide the veteran with adequate financial support for the duration of his rehabilitation and re-integration.

In order to make the care accessible for the veterans, the Veterans Law requires the Minister of Defence to make arrangements for the coordination of all institutions that provide care and support for veterans. This has resulted among other things in a central ‘veterans-counter’: A “one stop shop”, reachable by telephone and by internet, that veterans and their families can call upon for all kinds of support they are entitled to.

The Veterans Law obliges the government to establish and maintain a central registration of veterans in order to be able to reach them to provide care and relevant information.

And finally, the law calls upon the government to promote scientific research into mission-related health problems, the outcome of which can be used in improving the care for veterans.

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Ladies and gentlemen,

Coming from a situation where the Dutch population was hardly aware of the existence of veterans and – even worse – hardly cared, we now see a growing appreciation from society for the contribution that our veterans have made and are still making for that society. We have established a system of veteran care that will stand the test of comparison with others. And we are still working to improve.

By establishing the Veterans Law and by safeguarding respect and care for our veterans, we as politicians, the parliament, the representatives of the Dutch people, have taken responsibility for the consequences of our decisions when we sent young men and women into demanding situations.

I am very proud that I have been able to play a leading part in that development.

Because our veterans deserve the best, when they have given their best.

Because our veterans have endured hardship and sometimes risked their lives and their health to protect what our society holds dear.

And because some of them will have to live with the adverse consequences of their devotion to our society, for the rest of their lives.