

The Professionalisation of the Netherlands Armed Force

Ida L. van Veldhuizen-Rothenbücher*

Original paper
UDC 355.3(492)
Received in June 2001

The fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War led in 1991 to the decision to gradually reduce and restructure the Netherlands armed forces. It was process consisting of dozens of reorganisations. The idea was that the reorganisation and reduction would go hand in hand, not only operationally but also financially. Firstly, only one in three men were actually still called up in order to fulfil conscription duties lasting more or less a year. There was one more condition for the transformation: no increase in the personnel budget was permitted. The recruitment results were good for the first few years. As of 1996 the economic boom began. Recruitment came under pressure and the results started to decrease. The first crucial success factor concerning recruitment is the image of the armed forces. In view of the difficult labour market, salary, accommodation, training facilities and career opportunities must be competitive. Experience has shown that manning the armed forces depends on the position of the Defence on the labour market. This means that the armed forces need to learn to work together and to interact with other players on the labour market and to adapt to the labour market dynamics. This also means that the entire organisation needs to be adapted to this new position.

Key words: The Netherlands, armed forces, professionalisation

1. Introduction

The decision to transform the Dutch armed forces into an all-volunteer army needs to be viewed in a broader context of the developments at the end of the eighties/beginning of the nineties. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War led in 1991 to the decision to gradually reduce and restructure the Netherlands armed forces. It was to be the start of a large-scale and far-reaching process consisting of dozens of reorganisations.

In 1993 this resulted in the Defence Priorities Review. Following detailed debates in the Dutch parliament, the two main tasks of the armed forces were defined as follows:

- the contribution to non-NATO and UN operations (peacekeeping/peace enforcement), and
- the protection of the Netherlands and NATO territory.

The idea was that the reorganisation and reduction would go hand in hand, not only operation-

ally but also financially. The reduction was to provide funds. In spite of the decrease in the available budget, in order to achieve reorganisations on the one hand and to be able to invest in modernisation on the other. In this context, the decision was then taken to transform the army into an all-volunteer force and to suspend the obligation to enlist. There were two major reasons for this decision.

Firstly, the reduction of the armed forces led to the increasingly popular view within Dutch society that it was no longer justified to burden a relatively small number of young men with conscription: only one in three men were actually still called up in order to fulfil conscription duties lasting more or less a year.

Secondly, experience showed that the new role and tasks of the Netherlands armed forces were unsuited to the deployment of conscripts. The law stipulated that conscripts could only be deployed on peacekeeping missions on a voluntary basis. Even with an alteration to the relevant laws, the political decision to send conscripts on peacekeeping or peace

* Ambassador of the Netherland.

enforcement missions would remain a difficult one from the point of view of society.

Before a decision could be made on the suspension of the obligation to enlist, a number of questions needed to be answered. Was an all-volunteer army feasible? Would it be possible to recruit sufficient numbers of personnel? What did society think of the idea? What would it mean for the quality of the armed forces? Feasibility studies showed in 1993 that it would be possible to recruit a maximum of 8,000 professional soldiers annually on short-term contracts from the labour market. The most important condition could therefore be fulfilled. Now, almost ten years on, it has been discovered that the recruitment of sufficient numbers of personnel is crucial to manning the armed forces and thus to the right of existence of the Defence organisation. In the event of disappointing recruitment results, certainly during participation in various peacekeeping operations, implementation of the armed forces tasks is threatened. It has also been discovered that a thorough knowledge of the labour market is essential, but more of that later. This will be elaborated further in the text.

There was one more condition for the transformation: no increase in the personnel budget was permitted. Because the transformation into an all-volunteer force was carried out simultaneously with the above mentioned restructuring and reduction in the personnel complement, this condition would be met. In retrospect, the reduction proved to be an essential condition for the transformation into an all-volunteer force.

The implemented reduction was one of the most far-reaching operations in the history of the Netherlands armed forces. The reduction concerned 25% of the personnel complement of the navy and air force and as much as 50% of the army. The reduction in the army was therefore the most radical. This Service after all always had the most conscripts. At the same time, a quarter of the Non Commissioned Officers (NCO's) became surplus to requirement. On the other hand, in the same period of 1994-1996, it was possible to replace the conscripts with about 6,000 men and women with fixed-term contracts. You can see that this was a very hectic period with many changes.

SIMULTANEOUS REDUCTION IN PERSONNEL AND SURPLUS PERSONNEL:

the scaling-down of the conscript complement,
the build-up of the fixed-term contract complement,
many reorganisations,
the involvement of everyone,
and above all:

the necessary change in the culture required an integral and blanket approach.

That may be one of the most important lessons learned.

2. The labour market and the recruitment of volunteers

Although in 1993 there were strong indications that an all-volunteer army was feasible, there was no guarantee. As noted earlier, a great deal of effort and luck is required in practice in order to achieve objectives.

Recruitment results

The recruitment results were good for the first few years. There were enough young people on the labour market. As of 1996 the economic boom began and in a short while the demand for personnel on the labour market increased considerably. Recruitment came under pressure and the results started to decrease. The fact that there was still a reasonable personnel complement was due to conscripts signing further contracts. As of 1996/1997, however, it became more obvious that Defence was only one of the players on the labour market and that it therefore had to compete with others.

The recruitment results for the army in particular grew worse. There was a shortage of personnel for combat functions, such as infantry, cavalry and artillery, but technical and medical personnel also proved difficult to attract. If that tendency continued, operational tasks would suffer. At the navy and air force there is a particular shortage among managerial and technical personnel. These shortages triggered a shock wave through the organisation. It was finally fully realised that the transition to an all-volunteer force meant a fundamental change for all segments of the organisation. The recruitment process and the results needed to be closely and periodically monitored and analysed in order to implement alterations and improvements.

Recruitment has become one of the crucial success factors. Since 1997 new measures have been taken to structurally improve the position of the Defence on the labour market. This has achieved results. However, the continuing economic boom and the tight labour market continue to exert pressure on the recruitment results. Over 1999, for example, in spite of all the effort, recruitment and selection have provided about 6,500 personnel, while there was a requirement for intake of about 7,650 personnel. On an annual basis, therefore, that is a shortfall of about

1,100 personnel, resulting in under-capacity and vacancies. A structural development could hinder deployment. The pressure from the booming economy has another negative effect because the outflow of personnel with a contract for an indefinite period is higher than had originally been expected. In addition to investing in the recruitment of new personnel, initiatives must also be developed for retaining existing personnel.

The experience of the Netherlands in building-up an all-volunteer forces should be mentioned now. In the first years some crucial success factors were identified: the appeal of the Defence as an employer, a labour market monitor, the recruitment process, the duration of contracts and the activities aimed at employability (job guarantees). It has been realised that the process of intake (recruitment), throughput and outflow needs to be viewed as an integral one, with a view to the effects which activities in throughput and outflow have on intake. So we can add the integral approach as an additional crucial success factor.

I. Appeal as an employer

The first crucial success factor concerning recruitment is the image of the armed forces. Conscription brought a large number of young people into contact with the army. They knew the armed forces because they were medically examined or called up. This is no longer the case. Familiarity with the armed forces among young people has decreased since the suspension of the obligation to enlist. Now sufficient interest in the work and organisation of armed forces should be actively ensured. An improvement or even maintenance of the status quo as regards familiarity with the army requires great structural effort.

Offering adventure is in itself not enough to make an attractive image. Salaries and other working conditions must of course also be competitive, or at least the same as those elsewhere. A part of that image is that there are equal opportunities for men and women. The participation of women on the labour market is growing rapidly and demographic predictions show increasing dependence on women on the labour market. In 1997 the target percentage of women in defence was 8% in 2002, and it has been achieved in 2000. The next target is 12% in 2010.

Demographic predictions also show that the labour market will contain an increasing number of people from ethnic minorities. The Dutch government is taking all kinds of initiatives in order to promote participation of ethnic minorities in the work

process. There must also be an active response here to development in order to make optimum use of the recruitment potential.

Defence is in turn involved in direct recruitment from ethnic minorities. This chiefly concerns those from the former colony of Surinam, the Netherlands Antilles, Turkey and Morocco. Recent studies have shown that interest in a job in the armed forces is on average (especially for those of Turkish origin) greater than among the indigenous populations, but this has not yet shown through in the numbers selected. Interest varies greatly according to the country of origin, but it is very low among those of Moroccan origin.

II. Labour market monitor

Another critical factor that should be discussed is a labour market monitor. Armed forces depend on fluctuations on the labour market. The Defence is a dynamic organisation in a dynamic environment and accurate information about supply and demand on the labour market is therefore of vital importance. That is why a permanent eye is kept on the position of the Defence organisation on the labour market. There is a monitor; a labour market monitor which has been developed to check regularly on supply and demand on the labour market and a broader Defence Integral Staffing Monitor is being developed now to support the chain approach.

The primary target group is approximately 2.3 million young people (17 to 27 years of age) living in the Netherlands. 10% of this group say that they would be interested in a fixed-term contract in one of the Services. Only 50% of this same group are aware of the possibility of fixed-term contracts, which means that the current labour potential is 115,000. About 65,000 young people show active interest while 16,000 of them go through the application procedure. 5,000 to 7,000 young people remain and are taken on in the following selection.

Research is being performed in order to discover what the target group finds attractive and what it thinks about the Defence. The opinion of our personnel on the job situation in the armed forces is also being monitored. The effort is made to meet the personnel requirements as fully as possible by anticipating labour market developments.

III. The recruitment process

The existing recruitment organisation needs to be reorganised and become more professional. It is no longer a case of merely registering and examining personnel. Recruitment and responding to the labour market have become important activities. Recruitment and selection have been integrated into

one organisation, which works for the entire armed forces.

IV. Duration of contract/length of appointment

In view of the difficult labour market, salary, accommodation, training facilities and career opportunities must be competitive. The length of contract is an important item here. Conscripts have been replaced by personnel with a contract for a fixed term. Once their contracts have expired, they have to find work elsewhere. The armed forces benefit from the longest possible contracts. Longer contracts reduce the annual requirement for personnel and make recruitment and selection easier. At the beginning of the transition to an all-volunteer army, however, studies proved that a large number of young people prefer to have a short-term contract. That is why the contracts of at least two and a half years in the army and four years in the navy and air force were agreed upon. Longer initial contracts were only possible for officers or other groups with long and costly military training (e.g. pilots). Young personnel with a short-term contract and a good service record were asked to extend their stay when their first contracts expired. Fifty percent extend their contracts by one or more years. The original estimate was 25%.

V. Employability

As has already been said, employability contributes the most to an attractive image and it is seen as an important success factor. Defence promises to train young military personnel in more than just the military expertise needed in the army. They are also offered at least basic qualifications needed on the labour market. To this end, twelve training centres have been set up that help short-term contractors to obtain civilian diplomas for specific jobs in civilian society. Co-operation with schools has also been established in order to offer fixed-term contractors the opportunity to obtain a better position on the labour market after their time in service.

Offering education is also of financial importance. Military personnel who do not immediately find a job after leaving the armed forces receive unemployment benefit. A high outflow of personnel without the prospect of a job is therefore very expensive. Education helps to keep this cost at a minimum.

Investment in the social added value of thousands of fixed-term contracts leaving the forces annually promotes competition among Dutch workers. This Defence policy fits in with national and European employment strategy. Offering education to fixed-term contractors in order to improve their position on the labour market after their contract has expired is a major coup for our recruitment process.

Research has shown that potential candidates apply to join the armed forces because a fixed-term contract enables them to earn money and training, which will later provide them with the job they desire. Education must lead to work and it must therefore fit in with the expected requirement on the labour market. That is why, just as in the recruitment process, the co-operation has been established with job centres and temporary employment agencies.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, the main points of the transition to an all-volunteer army should be stressed again.

The decision to suspend the obligation to enlist and to form an all-volunteer army has been placed in the context of a changed security situation and the new tasks of the armed forces and the discussion which preceded that decision has been described.

A reduction in armed forces is one of the most important conditions for transition to an all-volunteer army. The costs were kept low thanks to the reduction in personnel numbers.

Experience has shown that manning the armed forces depends on the position of the Defence on the labour market. This means that the armed forces need to learn to work together and to interact with other players on the labour market and to adapt to the labour market dynamics. This also means that the entire organisation needs to be adapted to this new position. The Dutch armed forces are a dynamic organisation in a dynamic environment.

Some crucial success factors have been named. It is necessary to invest in the image of the armed forces. Advertising alone is not enough. More effort is required. It is possible to gain and hold a strong position on the labour market only if the supply and demand on the market and the ideas and behaviour of the target group are monitored regularly. The recruitment process: physical presence on the market is essential. A national network is needed in order to be able to communicate with other parties on the labour market. The organisation of recruitment and selection need to be adapted to the new conditions. The duration of contract must be flexible in order to meet the needs of potential employees and the organisation itself. Finally, the importance of education should be stressed again. Offering education is crucial and necessary to social and political acceptance of the system of having large numbers of young people in service for a short period. Education is needed to reinforce recruitment and to keep the unemployment costs under control. Last but not least: an integral approach is essential. ■