

Interview with Lex Oostendorp, 17th March 2015

Q: Why/how did you join the military?

A: I was studying law at Leiden University, and I hated it! So I stopped after 2 years, went to France to live with a family for 6 months and learn the language, and then joined the army as a conscript. The next six months (January to June 1977) at the School for Reserve Officers of the Cavalry were, in hindsight, the toughest education I have ever had. I was made commander of a platoon in West Germany in the middle of the Cold War. At the end of the conscription period, I had the option of going back to Leiden to finish my degree or join a management training school. But I joined the military academy as a cadet instead. I was 22, older than most others, who were just out of school. I was not passionate about joining the academy at that point, but I have never regretted the decision.

Q: Tell us a bit about your career and how it progressed?

A: As I mentioned, I started training in Germany, and thereafter trained in the south of Netherlands and in Paris. In terms of service operations, I was in Bosnia and Herzegovina twice; first as commander in charge of law and order and then, in 2003/04, at the headquarters of the NATO command in Sarajevo. This second time, I was tasked with creating a Bosnia and Herzegovina armed force – with three parties (Croats, Serbs, Bosniacs) who had just tried to kill each other.

A Serb colonel I met during that time asked me whether I had read Nobel laureate Ivo Andrić's *The Bridge on the River Drina*, a book about the bridge in the town of Višegrad, which had seen, over three centuries, continuous change, being located at the confluence of the Byzantine, Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires. I told him I hadn't and he replied that I would then never understand the country. I hurriedly phoned my mum and she found and sent me a copy of the book in Dutch, which I read. The next time I met the colonel, he asked me whether I had been to the bridge. When I said I hadn't, he replied that I would then never understand the country. So I proceeded to visit Višegrad and the bridge – there is a balcony on the bridge where I sat, had coffee and contemplated the historical complexities. I still don't know whether I understand the country...

But I came to the realization that, unlike the previous technocratic approaches, when building the Bosnian and Herzegovinan army, every unit must mirror society. So a unit would ideally comprise approximately 50% Bosniacs, 35% Serbs and 15% Croats. Representation of all groups would be built into the structure – these would be small units with their own command. The structure resembled the Dutch 'polder model'!

Additionally, I was involved in our operations in Afghanistan, in Chad and in Iraq.

Q: How has 'war' changed over the years?

A: 'War' is easy when you know your opponents, as was the case in the Cold War. Trying to intervene in civil war, such as in Bosnia and Herzegovina, is very different. In the case of Afghanistan, the insurgents were mixed in with the population – so who can you trust? Also, the tribal system is very different...

Wars have definitely grown in complexity.

Q: How is the army then adapting?

A: In two ways. First, it is increasing its internal organizational capacities. It is not only about combat now, but increasingly about civil–military cooperation. Secondly, there is the realization that the military's contribution to the final solution is becoming smaller. Are we, e.g., a part of the solution or a part of the problem?

Military intervention alone will never work in a complex situation, and all situations are complex now. That is why the military is interested in different approaches, and is interested in what NGOs are doing. The military leadership understands this – that military intervention should be integrated in a larger approach. The military is learning that the integrated approach works but that you need political will to finish the job. The armed forces are only as good as their political masters, and political short-termism affects the armed forces and its functioning.

The view is that it is important to participate and share risk as well, not only contribute to the financial effort. For example, when the Dutch left Uruzgan in Afghanistan, we were not welcome in the G20 anymore...

In Mali, the role of the Dutch military as part of the UN mission is very different. A role that people do not easily understand.

Q: What do you think of these UN missions?

A: They are not very successful most of the time. As a military structure, the UN still lacks capabilities. For example the Dutch contribution in Mali (as part of MINUSMA), is UN's first intelligence-gathering mission. There is no peace agreement in place (usually UN peacekeeping forces are there to enforce an agreed and signed peace treaty) – which is why MINUSMA lacks credibility in Mali.

The UN should, theoretically, be able to develop an integrated mission... But it needs an overhaul of its structure to better reflect the present-day balance of power, and not the post World War II powers that currently hold sway.

I have faith in the youth of today, though. We have more global citizens than ever before and the tide may well turn....

Q: What do you think of the work of the Human Security Collective (HSC)?

A: Initially, in operations, I missed the element of being able to interact with and learn from local NGOs. In Bosnia, there were many NGOs, and we tried to share knowledge. In later operations, we had more contact with civilian NGO players.

It is always better to work together. There are always voices that are not heard. Knowledge is always incomplete. The solution should not and cannot be based on your opinion but in what they need.

HSC's mission is to make voices heard – it is what it does and I believe in it. The work that the HSC does inspires me – the work that you do with youth, e.g., in Gaza and other difficult areas. HSC has carved out a niche for itself in the NGO world and in the international community – this underlines why the work that you do is so important.

Q: What can HSC learn from you?

A: I can share my knowledge of military operations and how they are planned. I can provide the military perspective on matters and also share my contacts. I try and promote the work that HSC does in the network I am familiar with. I am also interested in cooperating on any teaching/training courses in The Netherlands with regards to countering violent extremism that HSC might be involved in.
