

## INTERVIEWS WITH DUTCH VETERANS

A data-set of life-stories  
covering the period 1940-2011

June 2012



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## Introduction

The **Dutch Veterans Interview project (IPNV)**, an initiative of the *Veterans Institute* in Doorn (NL), was conducted from 2007 to 2011 and succeeded in collecting 1000 digitally recorded life-story interviews with a representative number of veterans deployed in all conflicts and military missions in which the Netherlands were involved (1940-2011).

A team of 15 interviewers spread across various regions of the Netherlands conducted semi-structured interviews of about 2,5 hours at the home of the veterans. These were recruited through ads in veteran magazines and through direct mailings based on the Veterans administration of the Veterans Institute.

Part of the collection is freely accessible online after registration and can be accessed through:

<http://interview.veteraneninstituut.nl/search>. The other part is only accessible with special permission.

Historian dr. Stef Scagliola was the initiator, the project leader and the curator of this database. Together with several partners a number of innovative digital tools were applied, the multi-disciplinary potential of the collection was explored, and measures were taken to facilitate broad access to the data for the academic community.

## The added value of interviewing veterans



- \* The importance for academic research of documenting the relatively unknown world of Dutch military culture, specifically the informal structures and social dynamics that evolve during military missions abroad, which are hardly or not documented in written sources.
- \* The value of retrospective personal narratives of a social group that goes through various transitions: from civilian to military, from a peaceful environment to a context of violent conflict in a foreign culture, and at the end of the career back to the status of civilian.
- \* The increased relevance of personal documents as sources for research in the field of contemporary history

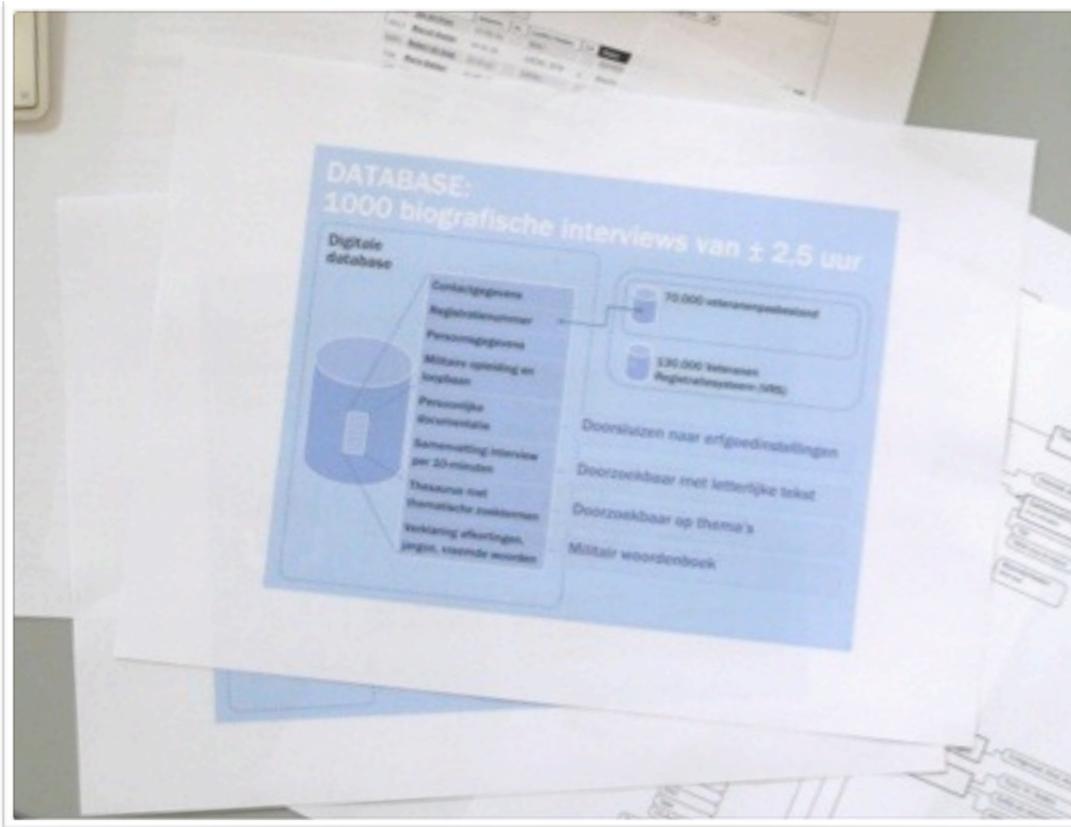
## Methodology 1: a multifunctional database of process-generated data

### A multifunctional database

- \* The challenge was to develop a data management system that could combine several functions:
  - ▶ monitoring the workflow of data gathering and processing;
  - ▶ creating a broad meta-data structure that was accessible to the individual interviewers so that they could add their data in the system;
  - ▶ anticipating the requirements of a differentiated search environment;
  - ▶ anticipating the academic requirements for reuse of data by both historians and social scientists.

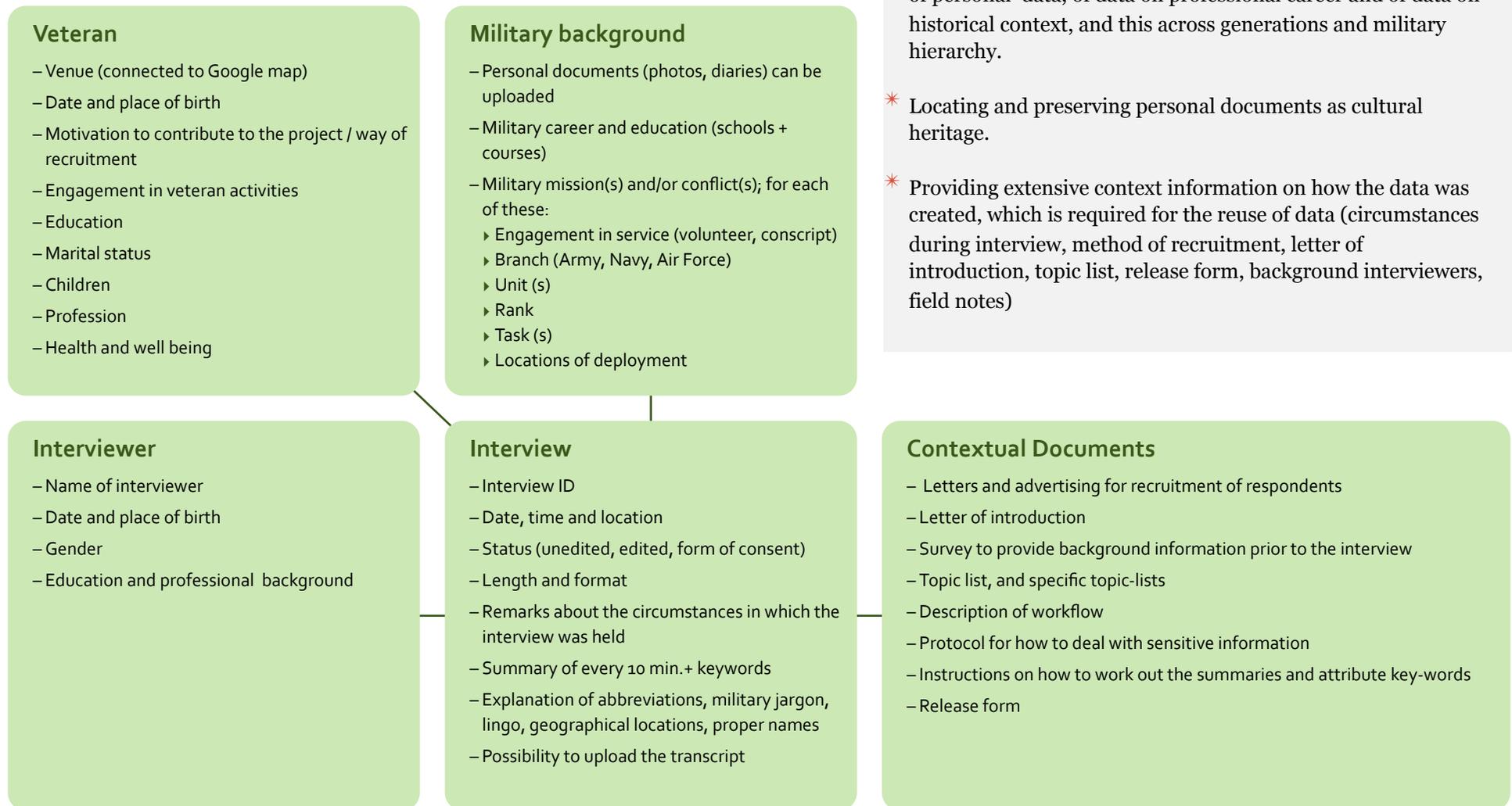
### IPNV – an example of process generated data

- \* The data generated by the IPNV is the result of a process, of an archival effort to document a subject on the basis of a broad topic list. These sources generally do not provide clear cut answers to specific research questions. The project documents experiences that would otherwise get lost, and that can provide an essential ‘stepping stone’ in the phase of preliminary research in various realms of the humanities and the social sciences.



## Methodology 2: a broad meta-data scheme

- \* Grasping the unique opportunity of combining the gathering of personal data, of data on professional career and of data on historical context, and this across generations and military hierarchy.
- \* Locating and preserving personal documents as cultural heritage.
- \* Providing extensive context information on how the data was created, which is required for the reuse of data (circumstances during interview, method of recruitment, letter of introduction, topic list, release form, background interviewers, field notes)



## Methodology 3: a semi-structured chronological topic list for future listeners

Topic List	
Family background	NL
Childhood and education	
Training in Armed Forces	
Adjustment and social interaction with peers, authorities, local population	Abroad
Performing tasks	
Contact with the home front	
Existential experiences and key-events	
Leave and free time	
Returning home and adjustment	NL
Professional perspectives	
Leaving the Armed Forces	
Veteran identity	
What are you proud of, what do you regret?	

### Additional Topic List: PhD 1

Veteran Interpreters are recruited and interviewed for a PhD on language policy in the Armed Forces

### Additional Topic List: PhD 2

Female military veterans are recruited and interviewed for a PhD on gender in the Armed Forces

- \* Asking the interviewers to conduct interview with a future listener in mind.
- \* Addressing the elements of transition from one cultural context to another.
- \* Asking the interviewers to cover as much topics as possible in the interview, in order to be able to compare themes across time, socio-cultural context and rank.
- \* When needed arrange a follow up interview.
- \* Creating a flexible sub-structure in order to facilitate the collection of data by PhD-students who research related topics. They adhere to the format of the project, add their specific questions to the topic list, and after their PhD is completed, the data becomes available to other researchers.

## Methodology 3: exploiting the multidisciplinary potential of the sources

### The multilayered content of oral narratives

#### Psychology

(influence on the mind)

- How did you feel?
- How did you cope?
- What is important to you?
- How do you look back on it?
- Has it changed you?
- What was your role?

#### Anthropology

(social meaning)

- What did it mean to you?
- With whom did you share this experience?
- How did the others react?
- How do you see yourself?
- How do you feel about the others?

#### History

(fact-finding, interpretations of the past)

- When did this happen?
- Where were you?
- How did it look like?
- Can you give me an example?
- Can you describe the process?
- What is your most vivid memory?
- What were the consequences?
- Linking to other sources

\* The interviewers have been asked to pay attention to the various dimensions in the content of the narrative, and to assess which approach yields the best results with the narrator. Special attention has been paid to the historical value of the interview. This meant the instruction to probe for details about when and where an event occurred and who were involved, in order to be able to link this information to other sources.

\* The leading oral history theorist *Alessandro Portelli* characterizes oral history as follows:

*Oral history not only can provide unknown facts or illuminate unknown aspects of known events, it also provides insight into the way common people attribute meaning to the world around them, how they live through and shape social processes.*

\* Another leading oral historian, *Valery Yow*, describes the ‘trickle over’ effect from related disciplines such as qualitative sociology, anthropology, biographical and literary studies, linguistics, communication and narrative studies and all interdisciplinary work exploring the relationship between memory, narrative and personal identity.

## Three levels of differentiated access for the interviews

1110	Total interviews
80	Embargo
499	Restricted (accessible for researchers with special permission)
531	Unrestricted (freely accessible after registration)

*A total of 1.030 interviews are accessible to researchers*

## Additional search possibilities

**Thesaurus:**  
Jeugd; Gezinsituatie; Herinneringen aan Eerste Wereldoorlog; Lagere school; Voortgezet onderwijs; Crisis jaren '20-'30; Keuring en oproep voor militaire dienst; Opleiding tot reserve-officier in deeltijd

### *Thematic thesaurus*

**Vreemde woorden**  
Kerkrade; Heerlen; Visé; HBS-B; Paters Fri  
aan de allerarmsten); Kloosterkazerne; KM  
(=R.I. Regiment Infanterie); Grubbenvorst;  
schietgat); Semi-permanente opstelling SP  
Peel-Raamstelling; Straelen; Verhakking st

### *Military dictionary*

## Efforts to optimize the retrieval success in the search environment

- \* Anticipating different needs by creating three search environments, each with a specific selection of searchable fields, based on the range of uses of the interview that the veteran has agreed upon and that is documented in the release form:
  1. The *archivist*: has access to all fields, including a few classified items.
  2. The *academic community*: has access to the restricted part of the collection only with special permission.
  3. The *general public*: has free online access to the unrestricted part of the collection after registration.
- \* Seizing the opportunity of involving the 15 interviewers who wrote all the summaries of the interviews, into the collective effort of creating a thematic thesaurus, to tag the 10 min. summaries in a meaningful way. The key words that were first suggested by them have been preserved, in order to link them to the agreed term that has been attributed by the editor in the final editing process.
- \* Documenting and explaining abbreviates, military jargon, slang, lingo and geographical names. This with the intent of compiling a military dictionary and anticipating future developments in speech retrieval.
- \* Extensive possibilities for cross linking with other digital archives, with the many websites/logs created within the veterans community, and with large scale veterans oral history projects in the US, GB, Canada and Australia.

## Special sub-projects realized with the data

Being the first large scale digital born interview-collection in the Netherlands, the database was considered suitable for the application of a number of innovative digital tools. In addition to this it joined several initiatives set up to standardize meta-data of digital collections and to secure long term preservation.

### **Exploit the potential of digital data:**

- ▶ **Applying new technology**
- ▶ **Providing broad access and securing long term preservation**
- ▶ **Other special projects**

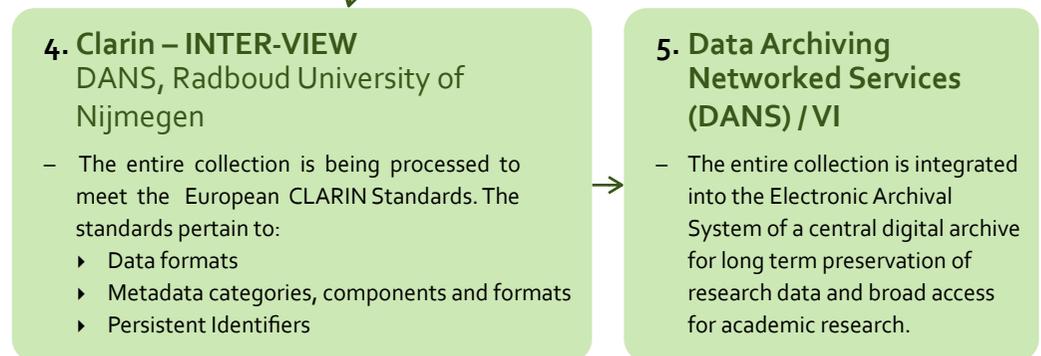
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## Applying New Technology



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## Providing Broad Access, Securing Long Term Preservation



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## Other special project

### 6. Friendly Fire Interviews

TNO Defence and Safety

- Narrators located on the basis of a search in the database with the keywords 'friendly fire', were approached for a follow up interview specifically focused on this subject. These interviews yielded rich material and formed the basis for a historical typology of friendly fire incidents for a European Research Project on safety during military operations.



## Relevance of the data-set for different audiences

- \* The collection is valuable for different academic disciplines: history, media-studies, memory studies, social psychology, linguistics, sociology, anthropology, ICT-research, archival and information studies.
- \* Researchers can profit from the digital structures that have been developed: open data, sharing data, reuse of data, depositing related data, searching with a digital tool, enriching a digital publication
- \* The general audience can learn about military cultures. The collection contributes to bridging the civil-military gap that has increased since the end of conscription in 1996 and the involvement of the Netherlands in multinational peace-keeping missions.
- \* The Armed Forces can profit from the retrospective reflections of its former employees with regard to policy on social, psychological and institutional issues.

## Creators and Partners

The data-set of the interviewproject Dutch Veterans was realized thanks to the effort, support and advice of many people.

### Creators

Project-manager and curator: *Stef Scagliola*

Assistant-manager: *Gerrie Koops*

Secretary and administrator: *Janny Bakker- de Sain*

Head of Centre for Knowledge and Expertise of Veterans  
Institute: *Jos Weerts*

Interviewers of the VI: *Martin Elands, Gielt Algra, Patricia Huls- Van Zijl, Jos Groen, Jos Weerts, Natasja Rietveld*

Free-lance Interviewers: *Ageeth van der Veen, Florian Linck, Inge van Zoelen, Klazien van Brandwijk, Arie-Jan van Hees, Theo Boiten, Bart Wagenaar, Bart Hetebrij, Edith van Loo, Paul Troost, Casper van Bruggen, Rein Bijkerk, Tineke van Gulik, Karolien Bais, Annemiek Bal, Alfred Staarman, Manon Westenbroek, David Gaillard, Marleen Wegman, Martijn van Dijk, Bert van Elk*

Interviewers of the Netherlands Defence Academy: *Adrea van Dijk, Jolanda Bosch*

### Information architecture and technology

PSid – *Paolo Sancis*

Become-IT – *Leo Kodde*

TICA-solutions – *Ishan Sital and Georgi Khomericki*

## Contribution to dataset validation

- \* **The Veteran Tapes** – [www.watveteranenvertellen.nl](http://www.watveteranenvertellen.nl)  
Data Archiving Networked Services (DANS)  
*drs. Paula Witkamp* and *dr. Rene van Horik*  
  
Faculty of communication studies – Radboud University of Nijmegen  
*prof. Fred Wester, dr. Ellen Hijmans*  
  
Faculty of Social Sciences – Vrije University Amsterdam  
*dr. Harry van den Berg* and *drs. Susan Woelders*  
  
Faculty of Social Sciences – Radboud University of Nijmegen  
*dr. Hans Marks* and *drs. Inge Melchior*  
  
Faculty of Human Science – University of Ottawa  
*dr. Karlijn Demasure*  
  
Faculty of Social Sciences – Radboud University of Nijmegen  
*dr. Hennie Boeije* and *drs. Sarah Drost*  
  
Netherlands Defence Academy – Faculty of Social Science  
*dr. Rene Moelker* and *dr. Rudy Richardson*  
  
Veterans Institute  
*dr. Stef Scagliola*
- \* **Friendly Fire Typology**  
TNO Defence and Safety  
*prof. Jan Maarten Schraagen*
- \* **Netherlands Defence Academy**  
PhD candidate Netherlands Defence Academy  
*drs. Andrea van Dijk*  
*drs. Yolanda Bosch*

## \* **Legermuseum Delft**

The collection was used for a pilot exhibit meant to visualize experiences of veterans.  
Head of exhibition department: *drs. van der Pols*

## \* **Mariniersmuseum Rotterdam**

Six video-life story interviews were held with leading senior ex-marines for the exhibit in the museum. The museum could profit from the skills of the interview-pool, the meta-data-structure, the digital search environment and the long term preservation policy.  
Assistant-director: *drs. Annelies Visser*

## Development of digital tools

### \* **The Veteran Tapes Enhanced Publication The Oral History Annotation Tool**

Data Archiving Networked Services (DANS)  
*drs. Paula Witkamp* and *dr. Rene van Horik*

Centre for Language and Speech Technology – Radboud University of Nijmegen  
*dr. Henk van den Heuvel, drs. Eric Sanders*

Veterans Institute  
*dr. Stef Scagliola* and *ms. Gerrie Koops*

## Support to the IPNV with expertise and advise

Netherlands Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide studies (NIOD)

*prof. Peter Romijn, drs. Annemieke van Bockxmeer*

Royal Institute of Caribbean and Asian Studies (KITLV)  
*dr. Fridus Steijlen*

*Dr. Christ Klep*, independent military historian/consultant

Netherlands Defence Academy (NLDA)

*prof. Jan van der Meulen*

*dr.mr. Peter van der Kruit*

Institute for Dutch Military History (NIMH)

*prof. Jan Hoffenaar*

*drs. Dirk Barth*, former secretary general of Ministry of Defence

Meertens Instituut

*Kees Grijpink*

Faculty of Human Media Interaction – University of Twente

*Prof. Franciska de Jong, dr.Roeland Ordelman, dr. Arjan van Hessen*

SURF foundation

*mr. Wilma Mossink*

Vormingscentrum van de Dienst Geestelijke Verzorging van de Krijgsmacht

*Huize Beukbergen*

## Support for facilitating broad access to the collection

Data Archiving Networked Services (DANS)

*drs. Paula Witkamp, dr. Rene van Horik* (integrating collection into EASY)

Centre for Language and Speech Technology – Radboud University of Nijmegen

*dr. Henk van den Heuvel, drs. Erik Sanders*

DANS - *dr. Marjan Grootveld*

(integrating collection in CLARIN infrastructure (INTER-VIEWS))

## Funding for the IPNV

- \* **Ministry of Defence**  
Department of Veterans Affairs/
- \* **Veterans Institute**/director ktza Frank Marcus
- \* **Ministry of Health and Welfare**  
Program Heritage of World War II
- \* **V-fonds voor Vrijheid en Veteranen**
- \* **Surf Foundation**
- \* **CLARIN – Common Language Resources and Technology Infrastructure**

