Book review and reflections on “Gewapend met gevoel” by Elanor Boekholt-O’Sullivan.

Diana Popa

Red Sky 4

www.redsky4.nl

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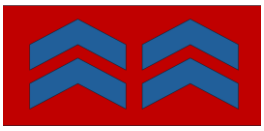


❖ Overview

"Armed with feelings" - the title of Elanor's book can receive different meanings, depending on one's own personal experience, timing and location of its lecture. A book described in the introduction as being about "The price of visibility and the power of the strange outsider - "buitenbeentje" (a Dutch word difficult to translate in one equivalent word in the English language – what word by word would translate as "someone with one leg outside") relates the experience of challenging or disrupting the status quo in the military and being SEEN as doing so due to the visible alterity given by gender.

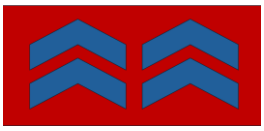
Elanor's honest personal story makes for a candid read, although, one may add, Elanor is anything but a soft or timid voice, seeing her speak on the topics she obviously cares about very much. This personal touch is what makes the message that more convincing and is one of the contributions of the book: challenging the status quo not through declarative, ostensive positions, but rather through rational questioning of realities that find rational reasons to be challenged and feasible and decent solutions to be implemented in an environment that affords to do so.

The following sections present reflections on the points made by Elanor in the book, underlying similar and alternative experiences.

❖ Location, Location

Having read Elanor's account while on military base, going through an intensive training programme, made the account in the same time that more familiar and, strange as it may seem, that more distant.

Shared experiences from Elanor's accounts include: the struggles with the fit of the issued equipment, the length of allocated weapon, how you wear your hair [in my case loose while in the mess hall and questioned as to if it is necessary to have it tied as during training or mission] – and resonate with experiencing training for combat deployment.



Yet, in an environment that to the neophyte or the outsider might seem the same, starch discrepancies between the two lived experiences emerge, underlining the differences between the manifest choice and associated conditions and drivers of preparing for combat as a career path and the *necessity* of waging a war of survival – for one's country, one' s family and sese of identity. The latter means responding to immediate threats and having to achieve the highest possible standard of combat in a compressed timeframe, one that would not fit any programmes designed with a career choice in mind, but rather as preparing for a war of existential survival.

These are two fundamentally distinct realities: *the choice* of preparing for war and choice for defence as profession or calling and *the fact* of waging a war of survival, shaping how training, deployment and combat are experienced.

Training in an environment long term affected by war changes the nature of the training, even if training in peace conditions replicates war time as much as possible. Mainstream films about what extreme military training programmes mean show the cathartic moment of ringing a bell of another clear means of signalling that one has reached their limits, in either physical or mental terms and chooses to stop with the programme. This again reflects the perspective of preparing for a war of choice, for training as part of the chosen profession. In a war of existential survival, such a bell doesn't exist. Here one *lives* the warning "if you don't fight now, prepare for your children to die (fighting) tomorrow". This is where you see all ages engage in preparation for and participation in war.

- **Uniforms ≠ uniformity**

Elanor's stance on the importance of making room for others (Ruimte maken for anderen) reminds of the "leading from behind" approach and Simon's Sinnek's "leaders eat last". This reflects the position of putting the individual and the organisation – Defence in this case – at the centre. It is also relevant in a heterogeneous group in terms of age, experiences, specialisations and

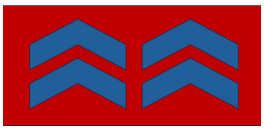
backgrounds. Yet again, these are choices that peacetime affords. So very different from having to set-up organisational structures during war time. Churchill’s account of setting up the War Cabinet in WWII comes to mind. Taking the lessons from the political realm is relevant here as well. In the political realm, philosophy tells us that the very best have a moral duty to be politically engaged in the affairs of the state and that lack of political engagement by the very best of society leads to a situation where *the polis* is conducted by less than the very best of its citizens. This leads to and the idea that “if you choose not to be engaged with the affairs of the polis, then you deserve the leaders that you have”.

Reading Elanor’s account on being told - “je past hier niet” – (you don’t fit in here) recalled of phrases such as “[this] is not for you” and ”you weren’t the deadliest of the group but never missed one day of training”, suggesting the preference – not need – for uniformity.

The following should be said about the necessity of uniformity within the group. The idea of pieces that need to fit together comes as a reflection of waging war as a matter of choice, or rather of benefiting from the choice of allocating an abundance of resources to an abundance of different needs, a reflection of aiming to bring together elements that could, in the fastest time possible, be moulded in a uniform conglomerate that can be manoeuvred towards prior defined objectives with the least resistance (tegenkracht) possible. This perspective of the perquisite to “fit in” in the military in order to have a place in it is different from the Swedish or Finish perspectives of whole of society approach to defence and the Israeli perspective of the citizen – soldier – all streaming from environments that are (potentially) faced with existential threats and that have a history of facing such cold or hot threats.

- **War has no gender**

Reading Elanor’s struggles regarding “female facilities” during military training or deployment – especially in terms of sleeping facilities was particularly striking when doing so in an open dormitory space with 30-40 men. In such a space, with a little inventiveness, one quickly learns how to obtain visual privacy: the bottom bunk bed can quickly be turned into an enclosed space, using one of the issued or

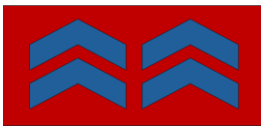


available pieces of equipment – mattress cover, poncho, thermal blanket or towel. Acoustic isolation is however not recommended in a space where one must quickly react to alerts. At night as well, the space becomes surprisingly quiet given the number of persons occupying it. There is respect for the presence of (the few) women in the compound, respect for following the same training, wearing the same heavy full gear four hours – sometimes days on end, doing drills, night shifts and all the rest.

Elanor gives several times examples from Ukraine and how women in the Ukrainian army expect fast improvements regarding ill-fitting equipment such as body armour in order to be at their best on the frontlines. This allows for focusing on the task rather than having to struggle with the equipment, again something that in a training or short term deployment which is part of a career choice can be seen as a temporary hindrance that could be pushed through during the beforehand known time frame, (although one might ask as to the why that this should be so) but that in the case of training for quick deployment to the front line could take its toll on overall achievement. And if evaluation standards are the same regardless of gender but equipment has different impact on overall performance, we are left with an unbalance. As Elanor describes it – "it is the difference between working safe and efficient and constant compensating". I would add to this the importance of a well-fitting BH, as having to wear one day and night inevitably leaves rashes. This is the case since an air alarm could sound at any time, requiring gearing up and staying out for an unknown period of time. Therefore, given:

- number of pieces in the full gear one has to get into after jumping out of bed at the sound of the air alarm and someone next to you shouting "AIR RAID":
    - thermal layer, uniform, winter jacket and winter trousers, boots, combat belt, body armour, helmet, weapon, backpack, sleeping bag;
    - low temperatures;
    - time required to be in full gear and battle ready;

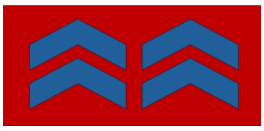
one learns how to optimise clothing and equipment: not taking the BH off is one way. At the price of skin rashes. Others choose to sleep half equipped. Either way, discomfort is inevitably present.



It is understandable to address such issues as early as possible, because in war time you do have to wear that body armour or backpack for extended periods of time that inevitably will cause back pain just because of the weight, regardless of actual fit. Programs for combat veterans in Ukraine casually mention measures for recovering from back pain caused by wearing body armour and full gear. It is an experience shared by many, with consequences felt by a large segment of society – given the national draft – and that is addressed through coordinated national programmes.

Other forming experiences one usually acquires during standard military training are altered when in real war conditions. In wartime, the bed that must be made up with military precision mentioned by Elenor is disturbed by consecutive night air raid alarms requiring all military personnel to dress up in full battle gear within minutes and reach designated outside gathering point. This has the effect of a hurricane passing through the barracks, leaving things ravished, broken, discarded.

One finds that wartime conditions thus alter the weight of having "female facilities". Showering in wartime is another facility that is not gender specific. On base, many showers are open spaces, with no privacy shield. Timetables for women shower time can be disturbed by lack of hot water in the allocated interval – given low demand based on number of women. This means inevitably showering late in the evening during "male time" shower schedule. However, nakedness in war and in preparing for war has a different connotation and becomes universal: it is flesh that has been tested, hit, hardened, shaped by constant required effort. Seeing nakedness on the battlefield changes one's perception of the human body: it becomes flesh covered in uniform drags, blood, bandages, dirt. In the showers, the body shows the marks of battle, of fatigue, of the intense training, through scars, bruises, muscle. It needs cleansing from the mud and dirt of the trenches, of the forest, from the sweet of the effort it is constantly put under. Showering is experienced as a gift by many military, a relaxing moment. Often music is played via portable loudspeakers personal streaming device. It is the shared experience of the realities of the battlefield and the training, of having experienced the scarcity of possibility of showering – on the frontlines for weeks on end – that transforms the washing experience in a gender neutral one.



The chapter on "Breasts and tanks" reminded me of the experience of colouring one's hair on base: after two months of forest and trench training, self-care requires some time and effort. Skin on fingers is hardened from weapon cleaning and magazine loading. Waxing is out of the question given lack of private space to do so and if not beforehand prepared with the necessities.

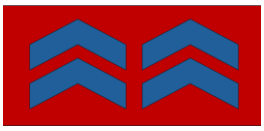
Hair colouring requires some effort and inventiveness. On base, this can look as follows: after a weekend trip to the nearest city for supplies, triangulation of facilities is required: colouring is applied in the woman's toilet - which is supplied with sink and mirror and – important detail - radiator that can be turned on while waiting for the dye to work for the indicated time. Then: walking outside across the sports yard, green tents, barracks to the building with the universal showers (with no sinks, toilets or power supply for a hair drier) and washing the dye off, then walking again outside back to the tent/barracks with the sleeping arrangements with bunkbeds for drying.

❖ Landscape

A phrase from Elanor's book that requires elaboration: "the paradox of defence is therefore this one: we train for war in landscapes that could exist only due to rest".

In the Netherlands we train for war in a landscape where we first have to negotiate for quotas over CO2 and noise and land allocation per sector of activity. We are negotiating and lobbying for preparing to fight war in a comfortable, clean and organised fashion: see the programme "Ruimte voor defensie". And often – it is other areas that receive priority. Yet waging war is a messy business, in more than the effects that different calibres and types of weapons have on the natural and constructed space. Real war devastates landscape in far more ways and on a greater perimeter that the one actually seeing combat.

As the pyramid of needs is affected by long term war waging, landscape is also affected, in an uncontrollable way. What we now negotiate in terms of priority of scarce resources allocation (space, financial means, people) is uncontrollably affected in real war conditions. Not only actual combat but also troop movements and training leave long lasting marks on the landscape. And these types of marks are much harder to prevent or remedy.



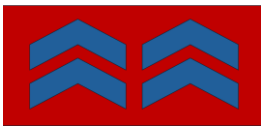
Discarded bottles and packaging that in a forest during peace time would lead to a fine, in a war area become marks of how a night raid was spent, a training exercise or troop movement took place. The amounts and diversity of discarded left-overs and packaging in forests and other natural areas speak stories about the ones passing through and the circumstances of this passage: is it cans of energy drinks? power bars packaging? canned food? bottles of alcohol, cigarette buds or plastic bottles of water? black plastic bags used for cover? wet wipes? These marks tell the story of the battles taking place, the people conducting them and the conditions in which they were fought. Cleaning up these natural spaces will take a lot of time and effort – none of these are biodegradable.

The lesson then is this: protecting the landscape that we cherish should have this perspective in mind: closing off an area now for protecting it might expose it in the future to disruptions we cannot control and we did not anticipate because we never tested war conditions when we could have controlled and planned for observed effects.

- **Technology**

War times has seen faster and more intensive innovation cycles. This is true for technology, and preparation cycles. Elanor’s account of the organisational resistance towards the introduction of drones is another example of the different impact that innovation has during peace time and during war time.

In wartime conditions, innovations that allow for any advantages in regards with the enemy are adopted organically, tested in real-life conditions. Organisational structures change organically as well, in response to results and needs. Technological innovation and social innovation develop simultaneously and adapt at different levels. Given differences in the character of the technological and social landscapes, and regional or local differences in the enemy’s deployed capabilities and actions, different (sub)-profiles of technological innovation develop, that could be transferred to other contexts or could remain location specific due to uniqueness of combined factors.



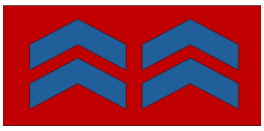
❖ The role of emotions

One often hears that emotions have no place in combat, that one must always keep a cool head and use the rational brain instead of the emotional one, which, as Goleman explained, do not function simultaneously but only one at a time, as the activation of the emotional brain deactivates the cognitive one. And yet, in wars for survival, it is the emotion that fuels the fight, despite all rational odds indicating insignificant chances of success or survival. Personal motivation becomes key in the duration and span in which one engages in combat. It is the difference in choosing defence as profession during peace time, opting for deployment in a foreign mission and waging war of survival. It can go as far as the cautionary tale of Machiavelli and Sun Tzu about paid soldiers and the belief that "armies fight battles, nations fight wars".

Paaratheid - a word so often used heard in the last year in Dutch media, that translates more or less as readiness for engaging in combat - is reflected on the ground by the principle "Eyes bright and fingers light". There is a unique look that mirrors the soul of the one who is fighting a war of existential survival, or who has lived it, one that can be seen in the eyes of Ukrainian military women. It is best described in Oleksander's book – The language of war – that is not the language of reason but the language of emotion.

The fact that defence of one's country *is* driven by feelings – in my view is reflected by the motto of Dutch defence: *Beschermen wat ons dierbaar is – Protect that which we hold dear.* This is a commonality I would say: it summarizes a sentiment, just as Oleksandr's convinces that hate is what drives fighting for survival. If feeling is a driver for what we do – defend - if a feeling is at the very core – it becomes understandable how the need to protect could lead to the position described by Oleksandr Mykhed - war as the language of hate: "The only language we can speak is the language of war". It becomes a duality – cherishing what one protects and loathing what threatens it.

Two books about life in the military infused with personal accounts – both about the lived experience of combat and training, yet so different from each other: "*Gewapend met gevoel*" and "*The Language of war*" — one about the rationalisation of emotion as a means of facilitating positive change, the other about what the experience of war does to the human soul.



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About the author.

Diana Popa has over 17 years of experience in research and academia and has authored numerous reports and scientific articles. Recent research and analysis focus on resilience as part of defence programmes, emerging disruptive technologies, in particular Artificial Intelligence in high risk areas, including defence.

Red Sky 4
The Netherlands
www.redsky4.nl
Redsky4@ziggo.nl