

## **The meaning of mercy in military life by General (ret) Peter van Uhm, former Chief of Defence Staff in the Netherlands**

Summary: Chaplain Frank Steijger

President Norbert Sinn gave us first a short introduction on the career of the General.

General Van Uhm made apologies in advance for the behavior of Nolan the Assist-dog who is in training with the family of General Van Uhm.

When talking about mercy there is an easy road, and there is a personal one.

The first speaks about the conventions of Geneva. We can discuss the theory and finally we know each other's opinions.

The personal route follows the road of practice of every man and of every soldier. It is the route we take by our moral compass. A compass is calibrated by knowing yourself, by values and ethics, and where you believe in. And that is not always religious.

The moral compass is the gut feeling, the split-second decision between right and wrong. If your moral compass is good, your decision is good.

An example: as a young Lieutenant I was on a 3-day patrol with a clear order: hide through the day, walk in the night and no contact with anyone. In the middle of the night a tractor with a large trailer passed by and the man on the tractor invited us to put everything on the trailer because we were going in the same direction. The men would have loved me if I had agreed because of the sour feet and the easy way of fulfilling our duty. (And love is a very strong emotion).

But if I had agreed, I would have lost them all because if I'm not trustworthy in this small moment of exercise, will I be trustworthy when we are in real battle?

But does every soldier have the right moral compass?

Unfortunately the answer is not a full yes, there for training is important but education is more important. Mercifulness starts with understanding. Every soldier must have the right situational awareness. If we go to another country we must have a cultural awareness. If we go to Afghanistan, we visit a mosque and we speak with an Imam.

Our intent, and our training were not to kill the Taliban but to make them irrelevant. When there was an attack, we always tried to get out as soon as possible.

And they said: crazy Dutch, why don't you fight back, you are a coward. We were able to kill them all, but then the fathers and the mothers of the surrounding villages won't see their sons and husbands back. And who takes care for the family then? Always look at the goals and the effect!

Same after a heavy fight with the Taliban in a village, several of them were killed and others taken prisoner. The Lieutenant gave the order to cover all the dead and not to make pictures or fun about it. They gave and received respect. So we didn't hand over our prisoners of war before there was a covenant with the government.

But we also know there is a difference between the Afghans and us. For example in Afghanistan an amputation is lethal, because when someone brings more costs than he can produce, he is useless. So sometimes our doctors tried to save a limb although it was live risking.

Sometimes we have to learn it in a hard way: during a social patrol a sergeant major found a young boy whose legs were severely burned. He brought the boy to our hospital and they treated him in the best way. But in the end the boy was not able to walk again. The sergeant major makes an appointment with the parents to bring him to the hospital every week for a checkup of his progress.

After three weeks the parents didn't appear at the hospital and the major decided to visit them. And when he asked for the boy they said: "He's fessing wood in the mountains". They could not afford a cripple child.

Our moral compass also asks us to address something that's morally wrong. Our uniforms are made to impress but under the uniform we stay humans. When I decided, as a kid, to serve my country and later on to serve my soldiers it meant to take care for them. Therefore I see a clear difference between responsibility and guilt.

As chief of command I had to visit a young widow and her daughter; her husband died during an exercise. I was there to bring my condolences. The sergeant has promised them to fix the garden after the exercise but now it was a mess. I asked my advisers if there was a possibility to get this done. Legally there was no opportunity, but I used tax money and time from the unit to get it done.

As a soldier you are always responsible but if you act by your moral compass you are not guilty. And the toughest decision you have to make on them. At the first day as chief of staff, I walked into my office, nobody was at the office except my second. And the moment I walk into the room I knew it was wrong. My son had been killed by IED together with his driver. I had to go home to tell my wife that our son was killed. I knew the protocol.

My moral compass was scattered, what did I want? Revenge? Retreat from duty? During the day family and friends were passing by to support us, bringing their condolences. And in the evening I wanted to be alone with my wife. So we put on the television and we saw the journalist, who knows nothing about me, talking if I was able to stay as chief of staff. Their opinion was made before asking me one single question. I was furious. It re-adjust my moral compass, I would go on the road where I believe in.

I think that I did forgive the men who killed my son although I'm not sure when I meet them face-to-face.