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The Netherlands

The crucible of war: Dutch and British military learning processes in and beyond southern Afghanistan

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Citation

Vorm, M. van der. (2023, April 19). *The crucible of war: Dutch and British military learning processes in and beyond southern Afghanistan*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3594239>

Version: Publisher's Version

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Chapter 1

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Research puzzle: The lessons of modern counterinsurgency operations

War is, in its essence, a strategic competition in which the ability to adapt to the enemy and the operational environment is the key towards success on the battlefield. The side that proves to be able to adapt more quickly and effectively to the challenges produced by conflict will emerge victorious from the struggle.¹ Conversely, the combatant that fails to adapt to the circumstances at hand will be defeated.² Over the last two decades, the study on how armed forces learn during wartime has burgeoned.³ In part, this academic interest can be ascribed to the Western large-scale counterinsurgency efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan.⁴ In much of the literature on counterinsurgency, the ability to learn and adapt is emphasized as essential to be successful in such operations: “All sides engage in an extremely rapid, complex and continuous process of competitive adaptation”.⁵

During the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Western militaries involved were caught unprepared to conduct counterinsurgency operations. These armed forces were organized for and conceptually attuned to conventional warfare.⁶ This was compounded by the fact that most of the involved militaries had recent experiences in peace support operations in more benign environments.⁷ Consequently, Western armed forces sought to adapt to the specific conditions of counterinsurgency in Iraq and Afghanistan. For European militaries, the operations in Afghanistan, under the International Security Assistance Force mission (ISAF), were the main catalyst for adaptation as the Taliban insurgency increased in strength

1 Williamson Murray (2011). *Military Adaptation in War: With Fear of Change*. New York: Cambridge University Press, p. 1-3.

2 Stephen Rosen (1991). *Winning the Next War: Innovation and the Modern Military*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, p. 9.

3 See for instance: Frank Hoffman (2021). *Mars Adapting: Military Change during War*. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press; David Barno and Nora Bensahel (2020). *Adaptation under Fire: How Militaries Change in Wartime*. New York: Oxford University Press; Raphael Marcus (2018). *Israel's Long War With Hezbollah: Military Innovation and Adaptation Under Fire*. Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press; Meir Finkel (2011). *On Flexibility: Recovery from Technological and Doctrinal Surprise on the Battlefield*. Stanford: Stanford University Press; T. Mahnken (Ed.)(2020), *Learning the Lessons of Modern War* (pp. 181-196). Stanford: Stanford University Press.

4 See for instance: Stuart Griffin (2017). Military Innovation Studies: Multidisciplinary or Lacking Discipline. *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, 40(1-2), p. 196-197; Tom Dyson (2019). The military as learning organisation: establishing the fundamentals of best-practice in lessons learned. *Defence Studies*, p. 1-4.

5 David Kilcullen (2010). *Counterinsurgency*, New York: Oxford University Press, p. 2.

6 See for instance: Thomas Mockaitis (2016) *The COIN Conundrum: The Future of Counterinsurgency and U.S. Land Power*. Carlisle: U.S. Army War College, p. 18-19; David Ucko (2009). *The New Counterinsurgency Era*. Washington DC: Georgetown, p. 67-69; Martijn Kitzen (2012). Western Military Culture and Counterinsurgency: An Ambiguous Reality. *Scientia Militaria*, 40(1), pp. 1-24.

7 See James Wither (2009). Basra's not Belfast: the British Army, 'Small Wars' and Iraq. *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 20(3-4), p. 611-616; Thijs Brocades Zaalberg (2012). Counterinsurgency and Peace Operations. In P. B. Rich, & I. Duyvesteyn (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency* (pp. 80-97). London: Routledge, p. 80-82; Ucko, *New Counterinsurgency*, p. 9-12.

over time. The Western armed forces had to learn how to confront a potent insurgency while under fire.⁸

Central to this study are the British and Dutch armed forces and their experiences in southern Afghanistan. While both militaries had been deployed to Iraq and earlier missions in Afghanistan since 2001, the most intense episode of these conflicts arose during their contributions to southern Afghanistan. From 2006, when ISAF expanded its mandate to southern provinces of Afghanistan, the British deployed to take charge of Helmand province and the Dutch took responsibility for neighboring Uruzgan province (see map on pages 12 and 13). Although primary troop contributing nations like the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and Canada (in Kandahar) publicly emphasized their deployments as ‘stabilization’ efforts, their troops became involved in heavy fighting. Consequently, lofty plans about reconstruction and fostering good governance were temporarily jettisoned as ISAF-troops had to fight hard to establish their presence in the south.⁹ The ISAF-contingents were confronted with an intense insurgency and had to find a balance between fighting off the Taliban, supporting the Afghan authorities, providing security and services to the local population and keeping their respective domestic publics on board for the effort in Afghanistan. Like their allies, the British and Dutch forces had to adapt to meet the challenges posed by the insurgents. The learning processes adopted by these two countries will be examined in-depth in this study.

There was of course some irony in the fact that the Western militaries had to learn the principles of counterinsurgency. Many European states had experience from policing their colonial empires and fighting the wars of decolonization after the Second World War. Certainly, the erstwhile European great powers often had been, if not outright defeated, bedeviled by irregular adversaries.¹⁰ In these earlier conflicts the conventional military advantages accounted for little, as the domestic public often was wary about the efforts to retain (or reassert) control over their reluctant compatriots in far-flung territories following

8 See for example: Olivier Schmitt (2017). French Military Adaptation in the Afghan War: Looking Inward or Outward. *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, 40(4), pp. 577-599; Torunn Haaland (2016). The Limits to Learning in Military Operations: Bottom-up Adaptation in the Norwegian Army in Northern Afghanistan, 2007–2012. *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, 39(7), 999-1022; Mikkel Rasmussen (2013). The Military Metier: Second Order Adaptation and the Danish Experience in Task Force Helmand. In T. Farrell, F. Osinga, & J. A. Russell (Eds.), *Military Adaptation in Afghanistan* (pp. 136-158). Stanford: Stanford University Press; Fabrizio Cottichia and Fernando Moro (2016). Learning From Others? Emulation and Change in the Italian Armed Forces Since 2001. *Armed Forces & Society*, 42(4), pp. 696-718

9 Stephen Saideman (2013). Canadian Forces in Afghanistan: Minority Government and Generational Change while under Fire. In T. Farrell, F. Osinga, & J. A. Russell (Eds.), *Military Adaptation in Afghanistan* (pp. 219-241). Stanford: Stanford University Press; Theo Farrell (2013). Back from the Brink: British Military Adaptation and the Struggle for Helmand. In T. Farrell, F. Osinga, & J. A. Russell (Eds.), *Military Adaptation in Afghanistan* (pp. 108-134). Stanford: Stanford University Press; Arthur ten Cate and Martijn van der Vorm (2016). *Callsign Nassau: Dutch Army Special Forces in Action in the ‘New World Disorder’*. Leiden: Leiden University Press, p. 201-207.

10 Andrew Mack (1983). Why big nations lose small wars: The politics of asymmetric conflict. *World Politics*, 27(2), pp. 175-200.

their own lands having been ravaged by war.¹¹ Thus, despite significant military efforts, European states had in most cases been unable to reach their political objectives in these wars and, one by one, the European states relinquished their colonies.¹² With the colonial era now over, the Western European armed forces primarily focused on the threat posed by the armored divisions of the Warsaw Pact in Central Europe.¹³ Western militaries came to see counterinsurgency operations as a lesser form of warfare or even an unwelcome distraction as opposed to conventional warfare against a peer competitor.¹⁴ As a result the experiences with counterinsurgency dissipated and had to be relearned in the early 21st century.

The British reputation for astuteness in fighting counterinsurgency conflicts such as in Malaya and Northern Ireland was shattered, first in Basra, Iraq and later in Helmand, Afghanistan (see chapter 5).¹⁵ The British, the Dutch, and their allies made adaptations to the operational challenges in Iraq and Afghanistan and thereby ostensibly relearned forgotten knowledge. Furthermore, counterinsurgency was rediscovered as a germane topic of study for academics and practitioners.¹⁶

In Afghanistan the ISAF-mission ended in December 2014 and was succeeded by the much smaller *Resolute Support Mission* whose role was limited to “train, advise and assist” Afghanistan’s security forces, coupled with counterterrorism activities such as targeted airstrikes and raids by Special Operations Forces (SOF) to contain the undefeated Taliban.¹⁷ Yet over time, the Taliban increased in strength while the Afghan government found itself besieged in the cities. The limited Western assistance proved insufficient to prop up the Afghan authorities and security forces.¹⁸ When the international forces withdrew in 2021, the Taliban rapidly succeeded in conquering the country, culminating in the fall of Kabul in August 2021.

11 Gil Merom (1998). Strong Powers in small wars: The unnoticed foundations of success. *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 9(2), pp. 38-63.

12 See for a general overview of this period for example: Jeremy Black (2016). *Insurgency and Counterinsurgency: A Global History*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, p. 159-163; Ian Beckett (2001). *Modern Insurgencies and Counter-Insurgencies: Guerrillas and their Opponents since 1750*. London: Routledge, p.86-120.

13 Martin van Creveld (2000). Through a Glass, Darkly. *Naval War College Review*, 53(4), p. 41.

14 Martijn Kitzen (2012). Western Military Culture and Counterinsurgency: An Ambiguous Reality. *Scientia Militaria*, 40(1), pp. 1-24.

15 See for critical analyses of British performance in Iraq and Afghanistan for example: Andrew Mumford (2011). *Puncturing the Counterinsurgency Myth: Britain and Irregular Warfare in the Past, Present, and Future*. Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute; David Ucko and Robert Egnell (2013). *Counterinsurgency in Crisis: Britain and the Challenges of modern warfare*. New York: Columbia University Press; Alexander Alderson (2009). *The Validity of British Counterinsurgency Insurgency Doctrine after the War in Iraq 2003-2009*. Cranfield: Cranfield University.

16 David Ucko (2012). Whither Counterinsurgency. In P. B. Rich, & I. Duyvesteyn (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency*. London: Routledge, p. 68-69; David Kilcullen (2006). Counter-insurgency Redux. *Survival*, 48(4), p. 111.

17 Anthony Cordesman (2015). *Afghanistan at Transition: Lessons of the Longest War*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, p. 128-132.

18 See for this stage in the Afghan war: Carter Malkasian (2021). *The American War in Afghanistan: A History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 361-403.

Thus ended the latest experience by Western militaries with counterinsurgency operations. Regrettably, some signs indicate that Western militaries are already in the process of discarding the knowledge they have acquired during the counterinsurgency campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan.¹⁹ Instead, these armed forces are recalibrating to enhance their ability to fight conventional wars against state actors.²⁰ Yet if analyzed correctly, throughout history previous wars have represented relevant knowledge for the keen observer.²¹ Without institutionalization of these lessons, armed forces are bound to repeat the same mistakes.²²

From a theoretical perspective then, the study on how armed forces learn during conflict is germane, but incomplete. The resulting vital complementing question is to what extent these lessons are retained in the context of another conflict.²³ Are the lessons regarded as applicable solely to the previous conflict? Does the altered context lead to further contemplation and a reappraisal of the knowledge acquired in wartime? What is the influence of the new context on the lessons learned? To paraphrase William Fuller, is the previous conflict the exception to the rule or is it a portent of all future wars?²⁴ Both approaches are of course problematic, so managing experience and knowledge from past wars is relevant to finding a balance between retaining useful lessons, and sufficient flexibility and adaptability.

An oft-cited problem in this literature is that formal institutional learning mechanisms and their knowledge repositories struggle to keep up with the operational challenges and the pace of operations. Invariably, service members turn to informal networks to acquire the sought knowledge.²⁵ While these informal networks are expedient in sharing knowledge, overreliance on informal learning has the inherent weakness that it can easily lead to evaporation of the knowledge, in particular due to personnel turnover.²⁶ While this turnover is pertinent in peace time, its effects are exacerbated during deployments, where rotations are scheduled in intervals ranging from roughly five to twelve months.

19 David Ucko and Thomas Marks (2018). Violence in context: Mapping the strategies and operational art of irregular warfare. *Contemporary Security Policy*, 39(2), p. 212.; Jason Clark. (2019, March 29). "Good Allies": *International Perspectives on Afghanistan*. Retrieved from The War Room: <https://warroom.armywarcollege.edu/articles/good-allies>

20 David Ucko (2012). Whither Counterinsurgency. In P. B. Rich, & I. Duyvesteyn (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency*. London: Routledge, p. 67-68.

21 Jonathan Bailey. (2006). Military history and the pathology of lessons learned: the Russo-Japanese War, a case study. In W. Murray, & R. H. Sinnreich (Eds.), *The Past as Prologue: The Importance of History to the Military Profession* (pp. 170-194). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 193-194.

22 Cohen and Gooch. (2006). *Military Misfortunes*, p. 223

23 The literature on military change often distinguishes between war and peace time. However, Western armed forces are continuously deployed and as such part of a conflict. These new conflicts affect how the lessons of previous conflicts are regarded and whether they are still relevant. For instance, Western armed forces remained in Afghanistan after the end of ISAF in 2014. As the character of this engagement changed profoundly, it did not capture as much attention as previously. Other missions or potential conflicts began take precedence in conceptual deliberations instead of the narrower Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan.

24 Fuller (2008). What is a military lesson?

25 Kollars (2015). War's Horizon, p. 545-548; Serena (2011). *A Revolution in Military Adaptation*, p. 161-163.

26 Catignani (2014). Coping with Knowledge, p. 58-59; De Winter (2015). *The Army after Afghanistan*, p. 47-49.

In the literature on how militaries learn from conflict, the dialectic between the organization's newly acquired knowledge and the perceived core competences is a common theme. In Western armed forces, this tension is manifested by the practice of irregular warfare during recent missions and the perceived importance of preparing for inter-state conventional war.²⁷ Some scholars and officers see experience in irregular war as detrimental to the ability to fight conventional adversaries.²⁸ In the military context, this is a reflection of the central theme of organizational learning theory, which theorizes how organizations cope with the inherent tension between exploiting knowledge to refine their routine operations, and exploring knowledge to redefine their mission, strategy and structure in order to increase their chance for success or even survival in the long run. Paradoxically in this analogy, routine operations equate with conventional warfare while the practice of irregular warfare corresponds with exploring new competencies that lie beyond normal tasks.

To a certain extent, the apprehension by armed forces at the institutional level to adapt to irregular war is understandable when a dichotomous distinction between “irregular war” and “conventional war” is upheld. Military organizations must operate in lethal, complex, and chaotic environments and have established mechanisms to deal with the uncertainties of war through making calculated assumptions. The notion of conventional war is perceived to be ingrained in Western armed forces and helps them to render “complex situations actionable from a military, instrumental perspective.”²⁹ Despite the many expeditionary missions in stabilization or counterinsurgency contexts, conventional warfare remains the core task for Western militaries that cannot be wished away. When change is forced on military organizations, this can erode basic capabilities.³⁰

Yet, this distinction between irregular war and conventional war is not only unhelpful for analyzing conflicts, but also false. Contemporary warfare requires both the ability to combat capable opponents as well as to employ other, non-kinetic instruments.³¹ Whereas the former is within the competency of armed forces, the latter is more problematic. Striking a balance between these options, and knowing when and how to deploy them, is more of an art than a science.

27 See for example: Hasselbladh and Yden (2019). Why Military Organizations Are Cautious About Learning?; Long (2008). *Doctrine of Eternal Recurrence*; Kitzen (2012). Western Military Culture and Counterinsurgency.

28 See Douglas Porch (2011). The dangerous myths and dubious promise of COIN. *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 22(2), pp. 239-257; Gian Gentile (2010). Freeing the Army from the Counterinsurgency Straitjacket. *Joint Forces Quarterly*, 58(3), pp. 121-122.

29 Hasselbladh and Yden (2019). Why Military Organizations Are Cautious About Learning?, p. 15.

30 Ibidem, p. 15-16; Barno and Bensahel, *Adaptation under Fire*, p. 16-18.

31 David Ucko and Thomas Marks (2018). Violence in context: Mapping the strategies and operational art of irregular warfare. *Contemporary Security Policy*, 39(2), p. 211-214; Martijn Kitzen (2020). Operations in Irregular Warfare. In A. Sookermanny (Ed.), *Handbook of Military Sciences* (pp. 1-18). Cham: Springer p. 18; Ucko?

Consequently, studying discrete adaptation processes during the latest counterinsurgency missions is insufficient. While the British and Dutch missions in Uruzgan and Helmand have been designated as formative experiences, the institutionalization processes in these militaries are subject to the same dynamics of adjusting to a different strategic context. In other words, retention of knowledge after a mission requires a deliberate institutional effort. Whether these militaries have succeeded in institutionalizing the lessons from Afghanistan afterwards is therefore an open question. To examine the enduring impact of the experiences to Afghanistan, this research covers the developments within both militaries up to and including 2020. As armed forces are large bureaucracies, profound organizational change after conflict generally requires significant time and effort. By using this timeframe, there is a decent interval between the end of the operations and efforts to institutionalize the resulting experience. Moreover, this scope allows for assessing the impact of strategic upheavals since 2014 such as the rise of the Islamic State (IS) in the Middle East and the Russian aggression against Ukraine on the Dutch and British learning processes. Accordingly, the main research question underpinning this study is: *to what extent have the Dutch and British militaries learned from their counterinsurgency operations in southern Afghanistan between 2006 and 2020?*

1.2: Objectives and relevance

1.2.1: Research objectives and questions

The main research objective of this dissertation is thus to reconstruct and understand the learning processes of the Dutch and British militaries in relation to their experiences in Uruzgan and Helmand from 2006 to 2020. By answering the main research question, we gain insight into how and why operational experiences were used to enact organizational change. Furthermore, by extending the research beyond the operations in Afghanistan, we can examine the lasting impact of these experiences on the Dutch and British armed forces. This provides an answer to the aforementioned concern that Western militaries are already forgetting the knowledge from the latest counterinsurgency operations.

To answer this question, the Dutch and British operations in Uruzgan and Helmand are examined in the empirical chapters of this book. The focus of these chapters will be on the learning processes during and after the campaigns. Additionally, the political and organizational contexts of the Dutch and British contributions to the ISAF-mission are scrutinized to see how these affected the campaigns. This includes abridged examination of the Dutch and British relevant experiences in prior stabilization missions before deploying to southern Afghanistan. The empirical chapters show that during the operations, simultaneous

formal, and informal processes of adaptation were occurring at the same time. Attending to both sets of processes means that in this way, whether, how and why lessons were captured can be analyzed. Conversely, the deficiencies that were not addressed or even recognized will be examined. Finally, the dynamics of institutionalization of these lessons are assessed; as the missions ended, what were reasons to retain or reject the knowledge acquired in the field? Furthermore, what was the impact of new missions and potential altered strategic outlooks on the implementation? To accommodate this analysis of institutionalization in the Dutch and British militaries, the empirical data covers developments up to the year 2020. Moreover, this research aims to shed light on associated questions. Why are certain lessons learned and others not? What are the different dynamics underpinning formal and informal learning? How can informal learning processes lead to institutionalized knowledge for future missions? By comparing the Dutch and British cases, pertinent differences and similarities can be distinguished. In turn, the findings from these case studies can help to understand common military learning processes in relation to conflict. As such, this understanding forms a secondary, more theoretical objective of this study.

In general, this dissertation aims to contribute to theoretical works on how armed forces acquire knowledge and use it to enhance performance. By identifying what factors and organizational dynamics affect learning processes, we can enhance our understanding of change in armed forces. A particularly relevant subject of study is how knowledge is retained after a mission is concluded. While counterinsurgency operations have driven significant changes in Western militaries, the dominant current in these organizations points towards readiness for conventional warfare. This suggests that if armed forces are to retain the knowledge and capabilities acquired during recent expeditionary missions, they must seek to balance these distinct requirements within the constraints of finite resources. As such, the empirical findings of this research contribute to the theoretical understanding of military learning processes.

1.2.2: Empirical relevance

As the vast body of literature attests, there has been significant scholarly attention for the adaptation efforts by Western militaries during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.³² The British and Dutch experiences in southern Afghanistan form no exception. For the Dutch operations in Uruzgan, several academic works have been published that examine the campaign and adaptations.³³ Other works focus on specific aspects of adaptation such

32 See for instance David Barno and Nora Bensahel (2020). *Adaptation under Fire: How Militaries Change in Wartime*. New York: Oxford University Press; Theo Farrell, Frans Osinga and James Russell (Eds.). (2013). *Military Adaptation in Afghanistan*. Stanford: Stanford University Press;

33 See George Dimitriu and Beatrice de Graaf (2010). The Dutch Coin approach: three years in Uruzgan, 2006-2009. *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 21(3), pp. 429-458; Kitzen, Osinga and Rietjens. *Soft Power, the Hard Way*, pp. 159-192.

as interagency cooperation, relations with local powerbrokers, and special forces.³⁴ A comprehensive in-depth analysis of the Dutch military learning processes is lacking and can contribute to the understanding of this campaign.

The literature on adaptation by British forces in Helmand is more extensive.³⁵ Some of these works have been rather positive about the British ability to learn from their experiences.³⁶ Others have been more critical on the extent of changes and their effects.³⁷ Furthermore, insightful works have been written on the overall Helmand campaign.³⁸

However, an under-explored aspect for both militaries is the enduring effects of the learning processes in the organizations. As stated in the research objective, this study examines the efforts to institutionalize experiences from the campaigns in southern Afghanistan. Analyzing the extent to which the British and Dutch militaries have incorporated these experiences can help to identify the lasting effects of the missions and the potential readiness for future operations. To this end, the learning processes during the operations in southern Afghanistan warrant scrutiny as these have informed the evaluations and subsequent institutionalization processes. By studying these learning processes in a comprehensive manner, the impact of the Afghan campaign on the British and militaries can be assessed. Furthermore, by comparing these cases, pertinent similarities and differences can be identified.

1.2.3: Theoretical relevance

Examining how armed forces institutionalize the lessons of war for future use forms an understudied aspect in the significant body of literature on military change. When reviewing the literature on military change, which chapter 2 does in-depth, there seems to be a distinction between wartime adaptation and more far-reaching innovation in peacetime.³⁹

34 Sebastiaan Rietjens (2012). Between expectations and reality: the Dutch engagement in Uruzgan. In N. Hynek, & P. Marton (Eds.), *Statebuilding in Afghanistan: Multinational contributions to reconstruction* (pp. 65-78). Abingdon: Routledge; Martijn Kitzen (2016). *The Course of Co-option: Co-option of local power-holders as a tool for obtaining control over the population in counterinsurgency campaigns in weblike societies*. Breda: Netherlands Defence Academy; George Dimitriu, Gijs Tuinman and Martijn van der Vorm (2016). Formative Years: Military Adaptation of Dutch Special Operations Forces in Afghanistan. *Special Operations Journal*, 2(2), pp. 146-166.

35 The most comprehensive study on British learning processes during the Helmand campaign is offered by Tom Dyson (2020). *Organisational Learning and the Modern Army: a new model for lessons-learned processes*. Abingdon: Routledge.

36 Theo Farrell and Stuart Gordon (2009). COIN Machine: The British Military in Afghanistan. *The RUSI Journal*, 154(3), pp. 18-25.

37 See: David Betz and Anthony Cormack (2009). Hot War, Cold Comfort: A Less Optimistic Take on the British Military in Afghanistan. *The RUSI Journal*, 154(4), pp. 26-29; Sergio Catignani (2012). 'Getting COIN' at the Tactical Level in Afghanistan: Reassessing Counter-Insurgency Adaptation in the British Army. *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 35(4), 513-539.

38 Theo Farrell (2017). *Unwinnable: Britain's War in Afghanistan, 2001-2014*. London: The Bodley Head; Jack Fairweather (2015). *The Good War: Why We Couldn't Win the War or the Peace in Afghanistan*. London: Vintage.

39 see Stephen Rosen (1991). *Winning the Next War: Innovation and the Modern Military*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, p. 252-253.

Still, as Eliot Cohen and John Gooch posit, the inability to learn from previous conflicts constitutes a distinct category besides failure to adapt and to anticipate (innovate).⁴⁰ While recent works on military adaptation have offered enhanced understanding on how armed forces learn, the scope has been limited to war time changes.⁴¹ However, formally accepted changes during conflict do not equal institutionalization of this knowledge afterwards. Often, wartime adaptations are reverted once the conflict has ended⁴² and this suggests that knowledge retention after war is subject to specific dynamics. Works on the enduring lessons from (counterinsurgency) operations contend that this knowledge is often discarded after wars.⁴³

To understand the dynamics of learning in and beyond war, a comprehensive theoretical framework is needed. In chapter 2, a new framework is presented that synthesizes organizational learning theory and the literature on military innovation and adaptation. An important benefit of the literature on organizational learning is that it regards learning as a process that captures the transfer of knowledge from the individual to the institution. Moreover, these learning processes shape how individuals operate within the organization.⁴⁴ A further salient aspect of the literature is that it examines the internal dynamics, such as politics and strategic leadership, in relation to how organizations learn.⁴⁵ Still, armed forces have distinctive attributes that must be considered when studying learning processes. In particular, the pressures of war influence what and how militaries learn.⁴⁶

The resulting framework from this synthesis contends that there are three distinct but related learning processes in relation to conflict: informal adaption by units in the field; formal adaptation that is supported and accepted; and institutional learning when lessons are retained for use in future. In this way, this study contributes to understanding military learning processes. Furthermore, it highlights pertinent dynamics at work in the various strands of learning processes. Ultimately, a more profound insight on how and why knowledge

40 Eliot Cohen and John Gooch (2006). *Military Misfortunes: The Anatomy of Failure in War*. New York: Free Press, p. 26-28.

41 See Frank Hoffman (2021). *Mars Adapting: Military Change during War*. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press; Michael Hunzeker (2021). *Dying to Learn: Wartime Lessons from the Western Front*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

42 See for instance: Hoffman, *Mars Adapting*, p. 250.

43 See Richard Downie (1998). *Learning from Conflict: The U.S. Military in Vietnam, El Salvador, and the Drug War*. Westport: Praeger, p. 55-57; Austin Long (2016). *The Soul of Armies: Counterinsurgency Doctrine and Military Culture in the US and UK*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press; David Fitzgerald (2013). *Learning to Forget: US Army Counterinsurgency Doctrine and Practice from Vietnam to Iraq*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

44 See for instance Mary Crossan and Marina Apaydin (2010). A Multi-Dimensional Framework of Organizational Innovation: A Systemic Review of the Literature. *Journal of Management Studies*, 47(6), 1154-1191; Ikujiro Nonaka and Noburo Konno (1998). The Concept of "Ba": Building a Foundation for Knowledge Creation. *California Management Review*, 40(3), pp. 40-54.

45 Scott Ganz (2018). Ignorant Decision Making and Educated Inertia: Some Political Pathologies of Organizational Learning. *Organization Science*, 29(1), p. 55; Priscilla Kraft and Andreas Bausch (2016). How Do Transformational Leaders Promote Exploratory and Exploitative Innovation? Examining the Black Box through MASEM. *Journal of Product Innovation Management*, 33(6), p. 702-703.

46 Stephen Rosen, *Winning the Next War*, p. 30-35; Williamson Murray, *Military Adaptation*, p. 2-4.

is transferred and retained in armed forces can help to prepare these organizations for future challenges and prevent forgetting relevant lessons.

1.3: Research design and methodology

1.3.1: Methodology

At the heart of this research is a comparative case study based on empirical data to explain how and why the Dutch and British militaries learned from their experiences in Afghanistan. As most archival records remain classified at the time of writing, a historical reconstruction was not feasible.⁴⁷ Still, an empirical analysis could be conducted based on a variety of sources within the case studies. More importantly however, a comparative case study allows a more structured and focused approach. This helps identifying similarities and differences between the cases.⁴⁸

As such, the research combines deductive and inductive approaches. Despite restrictions to archival records, this study had access to a wealth of data, enabling the cases to be examined in sufficient depth and within their contexts. The frame of reference on the substance of counterinsurgency lessons as presented in chapter 3, helps to focus and structure the empirical chapters. This frame of reference categorizes the ability to learn, overall conduct of a campaign, interagency cooperation, intelligence, non-kinetic activities, and responses to operations by the adversary. For the latter category, the case studies examine and compare the efforts to mitigate the threat of IEDs. This was the most conspicuous adaptation with regard to enemy activity during the operations in Afghanistan. Furthermore, not only the learning processes themselves are examined, but also the impact on both the campaigns and organizations.⁴⁹ The empirical data is given precedence in constructing the case studies. In this way, the research aims to capture the complexities of military learning processes.

Simultaneously, to analyze the learning processes in and beyond conflict, a theoretical understanding of how such processes work is necessary. As elaborated upon in the previous sections, attempts at comprehensive theoretical explanations that fuse learning in war and institutionalization of lessons afterwards are currently limited. Therefore, chapter 2 has a more inductive approach. It synthesizes relevant aspects of organizational learning theory with the literature on military innovation. This provides a lens grounded in theory that can help explain how and why the learning processes manifested in these specific case studies.

47 Robert Yin (2018). *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods*. Thousand Oaks: Sage, p. 9-13.

48 Alexander George and Andrew Bennett (2004). *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*. Cambridge: MIT Press, p. 63-65.

49 See Jane Gilgun (2019). Deductive qualitative analysis and grounded theory: Sensitizing concepts and hypothesis-testing. In A. Bryant, & K. Charmaz (Eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Current Developments in Grounded Theory* (pp. 107-122). London: Sage

The inherent drawback of this combination is that the case studies cannot generate a new comprehensive theory on military learning processes. Nevertheless, the combination can help highlight the pertinent dynamics at play in armed forces in relation to expeditionary missions. In this way, the analysis of these cases can stimulate new thinking on organizational learning in armed forces.

As for the selection of the cases, this research has opted to compare similar cases.⁵⁰ Both the Netherlands and the United Kingdom deployed their forces in 2006 to ISAF Regional Command South. Invariably, the armed forces had to adapt to the local conditions and operational challenges in the adjacent provinces of Uruzgan and Helmand. Moreover, service members of both countries regarded these missions to be a formative experience for the militaries. As such, the armed forces were profoundly affected by these operations, which indicates their relevance to explain institutionalization of knowledge.⁵¹ To be sure, there are salient differences in the dynamics in Uruzgan and Helmand and between the Dutch and British armed forces, in size, organization and political context, and these do influence learning processes. These elements are explored in the first sections of chapters 4 and 5. By developing parallel case studies, this comparison can help identify which dynamics affected the process of learning.

A further consideration in this case selection is the availability of sources. The familiarity with Dutch operations in Uruzgan and access to sources naturally helped the selection of the first case. Early in the research, different potential case studies were explored. For instance, the Australian experiences in Uruzgan warrant consideration. Yet, during the Dutch tenure in Uruzgan, the Australian operations were more circumscribed in scope. This limited the feasibility to compare the cases. Canadian operations in Kandahar province provided a further option. However, for both Canada and Australia the availability of sources was far more limited than in the United Kingdom. Consequently, given the access to British sources, the UK's experience in Helmand was selected as a mirroring case.

1.3.2: Scope and limitations

As this dissertation's subtitle suggests, the research focuses on British and Dutch military learning processes in and beyond Afghanistan. As such it includes the experiences of Task Force Helmand and Task Force Uruzgan. Concurrently, the research examines how the operations affected the response by the wider organizations, at both the joint level (Ministry of Defence) and on the service levels (British and Dutch armies). As for the impact of these experiences, the research is capped to include developments up to 2020. As aforementioned,

⁵⁰ George and Bennet, *Case Studies*, p. 81.

⁵¹ Yin, *Case Study Research*, p. 242-244.

further case studies like the Canadian operations in Kandahar and Australian operations in Uruzgan have been considered for this dissertation to ensure a broader view.⁵² However, additional cases would preclude studying the Dutch and British cases in sufficient depth. Moreover, this would require collecting, processing, and analyzing significant amounts of extra sources to construct the empirical cases. Additionally, the research does not elaborate on adaptations in the ISAF-campaign as a whole or at learning processes in NATO.⁵³

Within the case studies as presented in chapters 4 and 5, the research emphasizes the general national campaigns and the operations in the land domain. This is not to deny the invaluable role of allied air forces in Afghanistan, but the developments in air power in Afghanistan have been studied extensively elsewhere.⁵⁴ A further limitation of this study is that it does not examine the efforts to build the Afghan national security forces as this is subject of a concurrent research project within the Netherlands Defence Academy. Any relevant insights of this separate project will be included in this dissertation.⁵⁵ To be sure, training and mentoring of local security forces is a key component of counterinsurgency operations, yet this research predominantly analyzes the internal learning processes in the studied militaries.

A final important consideration for this research is that the author is a serving officer in the Netherlands armed forces. This position offers the advantage of proximity to sources. Furthermore, having been deployed to Afghanistan on different tours help to identify themes and familiarity with operations and the environment there. At the same time, this fact also holds risks of biases. First, being part of the organization under study offers a more fine-grained understanding of its dynamics but also provides a mental frame of reference that can constrict the inquiry. Although this position cannot be disregarded, being aware of the implications of this viewpoint throughout the research helps to mitigate potential biases.

52 For Canada in Kandahar see: Steve Saideman (2016). *Adapting in the Dust: Lessons Learned from Canada's War in Afghanistan*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press; Howard Coombs (2019). *Canada's Lessons. Parameters*, 49(3), pp. 27-40. For the Australian experience, see: Karen Middleton (2011). *An Unwinnable War*. Victoria: Melbourne University Press; Maryanne Kelton and Aaron Jackson (2015). *Australia: Terrorism, Regional Security, and the US Alliance*. In G. A. Mattox, & S. M. Grenier (Red.), *Coalition Challenges in Afghanistan: The Politics of Alliance* (pp. 225-241). Stanford: Stanford University Press; Gareth Rice (2014). *What Did We Learn from the War in Afghanistan?* *Australian Army Journal*, 11(1), pp. 6-17.

53 See for a good examination on NATO learning processes: Heidi Hardt (2018). *NATO's Lessons in Crisis: Institutional Memory in International Organizations*. New York: Oxford University Press.

54 See: Rob Sinterniklaas (2019). *Information Age Airpower in Afghanistan: Development of the air campaign in Afghanistan and how it supported strategic and operational goals of civil and military policy makers between 2001 and 2016*. Breda: Netherlands Defence Academy

55 Lysanne Leeuwenburg and Ivor Wiltenburg (2022) *Met Geweer en Geduld: Trainen, adviseren en vechten met het Afghaanse leger in Uruzgan*. Amsterdam: Boom.

1.3.3: A note on sources

To acquire the empirical data for the case studies on the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, the research uses a combination of primary sources, secondary literature, and semi-structured interviews. Of course, most archival records on operations in Afghanistan remain classified currently. For the Dutch case study however, access was obtained to the archival records of Task Force Uruzgan and the Dutch Ministry of Defence. Most of these documents are still classified and could not be referred to. However, this archive helped to reconstruct important aspects of the campaign, identify relevant themes, and point to potential interview partners. Furthermore, the records served as additional validation for other sources. For the United Kingdom, access to operational archives was, understandably, not possible.

Still, a substantial number of primary sources such as doctrinal documents, policy papers and parliamentary proceedings was available. Furthermore, individuals shared documents that give additional insight in the efforts in southern Afghanistan. An additional valuable source was evaluation reports by the British and Dutch armed forces concerning their operations in Helmand and Uruzgan. Furthermore, a large volume of secondary literature on British operations in Helmand mitigated this limitation.⁵⁶ In the Netherlands, academic research to Task Force Uruzgan often focused on more specific to aspects of the mission rather than an overview of the campaign.⁵⁷

An important additional source of data was formed by approximately 130, in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The participants were selected through study of other sources or through referrals by other participants. Because the roles and operational contexts differed for each participant, the protocols used for the interviews were specifically attuned to the individual participant to address certain events or rotations. These interviews were held with Dutch and British service members and civil servants that were directly involved in the operations in Uruzgan and Helmand. A small number of interviewees are academics that had a supporting role during the operations in Afghanistan. As such, the interviews added personal considerations and perspectives during and after the described events.⁵⁸

56 See Theo Farrel (2013). Back from the Brink: British Military Adaptation and the Struggle for Helmand. In T. Farrell, F. Osinga, & J. A. Russell (Eds.), *Military Adaptation in Afghanistan* (pp. 108-134). Stanford: Stanford University Press; Anthony King (2012). Operation Herrick: the British Campaign in Helmand. In N. Hynes, & P. Marton (Eds.), *Statebuilding in Afghanistan: Multinational contributions to reconstruction* (pp. 27-41). Abingdon: Routledge; Frank Ledwidge (2017). *Losing Small Wars: British Military Failure in the 9/11 Wars*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

57 Martijn Kitzen, *Course of Co-optation*; Arthur ten Cate and Martijn van der Vorm (2016). *Callsign Nassau: Dutch Army Special Forces in Action in the 'New World Disorder'*. Leiden: Leiden University Press; Dimitriu and De Graaf, *The Dutch COIN-approach*.

58 Brenda Moore (2014). In-depth Interviewing. In J. Soeters, S. Rietjens, & P. Shields (Eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in Military Studies* (pp. 116-128). Abingdon: Routledge, p. 123-124.

During the interviews, subjects could be mentioned that are (still) classified. Furthermore, information could be shared that can affect operational or personal security. Therefore, the interviews have not been recorded. Instead, the researcher took notes during each interview and subsequently produced an abridged transcription. To ensure confidentiality, the data in this research will not be attributable to individual interview partners, as a substantial number are still serving in military personnel or are active civil servants. Around half of the interviews were conducted through digital means as COVID-19 restrictions precluded traveling during the research phase.

Of course, using interviews as source for this research requires considering potential pitfalls. First, the accuracy of the recollections by interview partners can be diminished, especially after multiple years since the events. By using additional sources for informing the questions before the interview and verification of the data afterwards, that risk has been mitigated in this research. Moreover, data analysis and coding of the transcriptions helped to identify similarities and differences in the responses.⁵⁹ Finally, in the research the individual interviews are generally corroborated with other interviews or sources.⁶⁰ The second potential pitfall is that of self-selection among interview partners. Perception of past events might be different among individuals that are willing to participate in interviews from those who decline.⁶¹ To be sure, not every approached interview partner agreed to participate. Moreover, some participants withdrew their consent later. Of course, that data is not included in the dissertation. By striving to include a broad array of interview partners over different rotations as well as civilians, the research has attempted to address the issue of self-selection to the greatest extent possible.

Together, these sources helped building the case studies to their current form. As such, the case studies help explain military learning processes in and beyond conflict. Furthermore, these chapters offer an empirical study on how the operational experiences impacted the Dutch and British armed forces.

1.4: Book outline

To attain the stated research objective, this dissertation is structured in three parts. The first part consists of the conceptual and theoretical foundations of this research. The current chapter introduces the objective, themes, and design of the dissertation. It elaborates on the considerations underpinning the research and presents its structure. Chapter 2 offers

59 Dennis Gioia, Kevic Corley and Aimee Hamilton (2013). Seeking Qualitative Rigor in Inductive Research: Notes on the Gioia Methodology. *Organizational Research Methods*, 16(1), pp. 15-31.

60 Yin, *Case-study Research*, p. 118-120.

61 Moore, *In-depth interviewing*, p. 125-126.

a theoretical framework on how armed forces learn in relation to conflict. To this end, it synthesizes the literature on organizational learning and military innovation. This chapter posits that learning in war constitutes a distinct but related process to institutionalization of knowledge afterwards. Furthermore, it studies the pertinent dynamics and factors influencing learning processes in military organizations. Finally, this chapter provides an analytical model that helps studying the process of learning in and beyond conflict. The third chapter will then provide a frame of reference on the substance of lessons in counterinsurgency operations. Based on an analysis of historical counterinsurgency prescriptions, ranging from the colonial era to the 21st century, a set of themes emerge. Combined with the theoretical framework on learning from chapter 2, this provides a lens through which we can analyze the case studies.

The second part of the dissertation examines the two case studies on the learning processes by the Dutch and British armed forces in relation to their experiences in southern Afghanistan in chapters 4 and 5. Each empirical chapter is structured in three parts. First, the political and organizational contexts of the missions to southern Afghanistan are established. Furthermore, previous recent operational experiences by the Dutch and British militaries are examined. Secondly, the learning processes during the missions are studied. Broadly, these can be categorized in learning at the campaign level and learning in specific themes or vignettes. These vignettes include interagency cooperation, intelligence, non-kinetic activities, and efforts to mitigate the threat of Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs). The third sections of either case-study chapter look at efforts towards institutionalization of the hard-won knowledge of the Afghan campaign.

Part three provides the concluding chapter and answers the questions that drove this research. It offers the main theoretical contributions of this study and what this means for thinking on learning in military organizations. Additionally, it enumerates the key empirical findings of the case studies and their implications. This leads to a more profound understanding of the extent to which the Dutch and British militaries learned from their experiences in Uruzgan and Helmand. Moreover, it offers insight to how these learning processes worked and what dynamics influenced them. Finally, avenues for further research and some practical musings are proposed.