

## DOLGA POT DO URADNE DANSKE VETERANSKE POLITIKE, 1848–2010

## THE LONG ROAD TOWARDS AN OFFICIAL DANISH VETERANS' POLICY, 1848-2010

**Povzetek** Čeprav je Danska država, ki je imela v več sto letih več deset tisoč vojnih veteranov, so raziskave na to temo še vedno na začetni stopnji v primerjavi z drugimi državami. To najboljše pojasnjujejo številni zgodovinski, kulturni in politični dejavniki, od katerih je najbolj presenetljiva resnična odsotnost vojne že od leta 1864. Zaradi vedno večje vključenosti Danske v misije OZN in Nata od konca hladne vojne pa je pojem danskih »veteranov« ponovno oživel kot politični dejavnik in kot predmet proučevanja. Vlada je zato leta 2010 prvič v zgodovini sprejela državno veteransko politiko. Članek obravnava skoraj popolno neprepoznavnost vojnih veteranov v danski družbi in odsotnost uradne veteranske politike do leta 2010. Vzrok, zakaj je Danska šele pred kratkim sprejela politiko veteranov, najverjetneje izhaja iz kombinacije dejavnikov, kot so majhno število vojnih veteranov, socialna država, politična konjunktura in sprememba danskih čezmorskih vojaških operacij iz prvotnih operacij za ohranjanje miru v prave bojne operacije.

**Ključne besede** *Vojni veterani, vojaška zgodovina, Danska.*

**Abstract** Despite Denmark being a nation that over the course of hundreds of years has produced tens of thousands of war veterans, research on this subject is still in its nascent phase compared to that of other nations. This is best explained by a number of historical, cultural and political factors, of which the virtual absence of war since 1864 is the most striking. Following Denmark's increasing involvement in "hot" UN and NATO missions since the end of the Cold War, the notion of Danish "veterans" has resurfaced, both as a political factor and as a subject of study. Consequently, in 2010 the government adopted the first-ever Danish veterans' policy. This paper addresses the virtual invisibility of Danish war veterans in Danish society and the absence of an official veterans' policy until 2010. It is argued that a combination of factors, such as the low number of war veterans, the existence of a welfare state,

political conjunctures, and the change in Danish overseas military operations from primarily involving peacekeeping to being actual combat missions, may explain why Denmark has only recently adopted a veterans' policy.

**Key words** *War veterans, military history, Denmark.*

**Introduction** During his annual address at the parliamentary opening after the summer break in 2010, the Danish Prime Minister, Lars Løkke Rasmussen, stated, “Denmark has one of the world’s best welfare societies, but we are still only learning what it means to be a veteran after serving overseas in international missions” (Rasmussen, 2010). He subsequently announced that the Government would soon present the first-ever national Danish veterans’ policy. The words spoken by the Prime Minister were not fully apprehensible – how can a society learn what it is like to be a veteran, one might ask? But the meaning was clear when read in context; for a prolonged period, Danish society had neither been acutely aware of its veterans nor created special policies to address veteran-related issues. Until early in the 2000s, the term “war veteran” found limited usage in Denmark, essentially being only applicable to ex-soldiers from foreign armies and/or the Napoleonic era and older.

This paper traces the gradual emergence of the notion of Danish war veterans since the 1990s and the closely related surfacing of a political discussion of how to honour the veterans and address their material and emotional needs. By studying a variety of veterans’ groups, it provides an understanding of how different their relationship to society in general was and thus why Denmark did not adopt a veterans’ policy much earlier. We also look into how the current policy was born and subsequently revised, and argue that the fact that Denmark’s veterans’ policy is a comparatively modest one is best explained by a combination of historical experience and the strong welfare state.

## **1 THE DISAPPEARANCE OF WAR VETERANS – DENMARK 1848-1994**

Being frequently involved in wars until the mid-nineteenth century, Denmark, like most other nations, had always had war veterans. But it is debatable at what point Danish nationalism reached such cohesion as to create a strong link between the nation as such and the soldiers defending it – thus establishing the idea of a national obligation to support and celebrate the nation’s war veterans. It is safe to say that until 1849, when Denmark became a constitutional monarchy and introduced general conscription, the army and navy were the king’s personal forces, not the nation’s. It was also the king’s obligation to care for the well-being of infirm or needy soldiers who had been discharged in good grace. This was regulated by various royal decrees, some dating as far back as the early seventeenth century. When possible, ex-soldiers and NCOs were assigned other jobs (e.g. as customs officials) when discharged, as a means of both tapping their skills and catering for their well-being. In addition,

special institutions such as *Kvæsthuset* (literally: the house of the wounded) were set up, serving both as military hospitals and as homes for infirm veterans.

These tasks were eased by the fact that the armed forces in early modern Denmark, by and large, consisted of a standing force of hired, often foreign, soldiers with a service span of around twenty years – so the soldiers rarely lived long after being retired, if they even reached retirement age. Nevertheless, with the emergence of a nationalist public opinion during the late eighteenth century, first among Copenhagen civil servants and intellectuals, and gradually as a mass phenomenon, the well-being of the members of the armed forces were increasingly seen as an obligation of the whole nation. This notion first emerged in earnest in Denmark during the Napoleonic wars, in which the country fought a brief war with England in 1801 and participated on the French side from 1807 to 1814 (Lundgreen-Nielsen, 1992). Following these events, a popular remembrance culture dedicated to the veterans came into being. It was during this period that Danish war monuments first began to celebrate “the common soldier” in their dedication texts (Adriansen, 2010). Significantly, this was also the first time private initiatives were taken to secure the material well-being of the wounded servicemen, as well as of the widows and orphaned left behind by those who had perished (Lundgreen-Nielsen, 1992, p. 113).

It was the combination of nationalism, democracy, general conscription and a new war – the Slesvig War of 1848-1850 – that in earnest created the conditions for the general acceptance of the idea that the nation ought to celebrate and, if need be, materially support its veterans and their dependants. In 1859, the veterans of the 1848-1850 Slesvig war organized themselves in *De danske Våbenbrødre* (the Danish brothers-in-arms): the first mass veterans’ organization we know of in Denmark. As the name indicates, the term “veteran” was not the preferred self-description of these men. Indeed, when reading the material left by the *Våbenbrødre*, one does not find the term being used at all. This association had a threefold purpose: according to its statutes, the *Våbenbrødre* came together firstly in order to commemorate their joint experiences during the war; secondly, with the aim of strengthening the will to defend Denmark; and finally in order to render support to members in need. At its peak in 1877, after having admitted into its ranks the soldiers who fought in the 1864 war against Prussia and Austria, the association had around 30,000 members – a very respectable figure for its time (Poulsen, 2016). While a veritable “cult of the fallen soldier” – to use George Mosse’s formulation – arose in Denmark over the next decades, the veterans achieved few tangible material benefits from having fought for Denmark (Mosse, 1991). But, more importantly, neither did they seem to expect such benefits. In line with the way various strata of society in medieval and early modern Denmark had established guilds which not only represented the members’ corporate interests and maintained their identity, but also provided social security for them, the *Våbenbrødre*, via the association’s membership fee and other sources of income such as a lottery, provided cheap loans, funerals and assistance to widows and orphans after the death of members.

Rather than vying for material support, the *Våbenbrødre* sought due recognition of the war veterans as national heroes, and in 1877, after sustained agitation, it obtained the reward of a medal to all men who had fought in the wars of 1848-1850 and 1864. Furthermore, in 1888, a 40-year anniversary gift was granted by the government to those who had fought in the 1848-1850 war. In 1898, all the veterans from the war of 1848-50 were declared eligible to receive an annual lump sum of 100 Danish Kroner as a token of the nation's appreciation. In 1914 – when the 50-year anniversary of the 1864 war was commemorated – this same gesture was also extended to the veterans of this war. It was, however, a very modest sum – equivalent to less than 1,000 euro a year in present-day value (Slaegtsalbum.dk). Furthermore, given that this annual gift was introduced as late as 50 years after the first of the Slesvig wars, only a fraction of the veterans benefited from this. Thus, while the almost 100,000 veterans of the 1848-50 and 1864 wars were held in high esteem by the nation, this did not turn them into an entitlement group deriving sizeable monetary or other material benefits from their service.

The 1864 war, in which Denmark was utterly defeated, was to become the last prolonged war fought on Danish territory. The defeat signalled the beginning of a time period characterized by a strong pacifist, if not outright defeatist, trend in Danish politics. Until 1949, when Denmark joined NATO, the Danish polity was deeply divided in its view of the utility of armed forces, and even during the Cold War Denmark remained, as aptly phrased by the historian Poul Villiaume, a “reluctant ally” (Villiaume, 1995). Three in particular of the four dominant political parties – *Venstre* (the Liberals), *Socialdemokratiet* (the Social Democrats) and *RadikaleVenstre* (the Left Liberals) – were manifestly anti-militaristic, and their virtual domination of the political landscape during most of the twentieth century contributed greatly to preventing the *Våbenbrødre* from playing a political role as such. The *Våbenbrødre*, in turn, contributed to their own increasing political impotence by deciding after the 1864 war not to admit new members. In contrast to neighbouring Germany, a strong patriotic and militaristic movement of veterans and ex-conscripts thus never materialized (Poulsen, 2016). Equally importantly, while considerable commemoration of the wars took place, a comprehensive veterans' policy was never adopted, and there were virtually no material benefits rendered to the veterans except for some of the most highly decorated and severely disabled, as indicated above.

Denmark's ability to keep itself neutral during World War I, together with the rapid German invasion of Denmark on 9 April 1940, were highly significant factors in further limiting the role of war veterans in Danish society. This virtual absence of war between 1864 and Denmark's participation in the 1999 NATO action in Kosovo meant that the country ceased to produce war veterans, at least if we limit the definition to soldiers officially sent to war by the government under the Danish flag. This, however, does not imply that no war veterans emerged in Denmark during the first half of the twentieth century; only that the Danish armed forces as such did not produce any.

After World War I, part of the territories lost to Germany in 1864 were recovered, resulting in Denmark “inheriting” 30,000-35,000 war veterans from Germany – the majority being members of the Danish-speaking population in Slesvig. In order to integrate this group into society, the Danish government adopted a generous package of measures to cater for the disabled veterans, as well as for the dependants of fallen soldiers. However, this legislation was not made universal, as it was limited to World War I veterans only (Marckmann, 2001).

During the decades following World War I, Danish citizens fought in such wars as the Russian Civil War, the Spanish Civil War and the Finnish-Soviet Winter War. These volunteers to foreign wars were, like previous groups of volunteers such as Danes fighting for the Entente during World War One, small and not awarded any official recognition as veterans.

World War II generated, if one applies a broad definition of “war veterans”, four distinct groups of veterans – all essentially having gone to war without any official recognition from the Danish state. Firstly, around 6,000 Danish citizens volunteered for German armed service during the war, primarily in the Waffen-SS. Secondly, around 1,000 Danes joined the Allied forces. Thirdly, another 6,000 Danish sailors manned ships sailing for the Allies. Finally, a diverse movement of resistance fighters emerged. Depending on whether one only counts the hardcore of fighters, carrying out sabotage or applying other violent means, or everyone rendering support to the resistance fight, the figure is between a few thousand and up to 50,000 (Poulsen, 2016).

These groups related to official Denmark in very different ways in the post-war period. The former SS-soldiers were sentenced for treason, and in cases where they had been NCOs or officers in the Danish armed forces prior to their enlistment in the SS, they lost their positions and pensions. Believing that they had been unjustly treated, some of the veterans organized and tried to influence popular opinion in order to have their sentences nullified and to be rehabilitated. Their efforts were not crowned with any success, and most of the former SS-soldiers, instead of fighting a lost cause, turned their energies inward and established their own internal networks for both material assistance and commemoration. During the early post-war period the SS-veterans' associations were monitored by the Danish intelligence service, and as of today the only monument explicitly dedicated to these men is a small stone on a private lot of land in western Denmark (Poulsen, 2016).

In contrast, the members of the resistance movement and Danes in the Allied armed services were treated as heroes after the war. A significant number of monuments in their honour were erected, and the Danish state maintains a special museum dedicated to the resistance movement. Members of the resistance movement were, however, not given any special veteran status by the authorities, and their material and medical needs were administered under a piece of legislation devised for all who had been negatively affected by the occupation – the so-called *Erstatningsloven*

(the Compensation Act) (Kirchhoff 2002, p. 126). The most significant step towards bestowing official recognition on the ex-resistance fighters was parliament's adoption of a fast-track procedure for obtaining a junior officer rank in the armed forces for those who so desired. However, only a minority of ex-resistance fighters availed themselves of this opportunity. Instead of seeking privileges for its members, the resistance movement officially declared that its members had simply done their patriotic duty, and expected neither medals nor entitlements. This set the tone, and no comprehensive set of measures was adopted. This in turn had consequences for the limited number of Danish soldiers who had seen combat on either 9 April 1940, the day of the German attack, or on 29 August 1943, when the Germans tried to disarm the remaining Danish forces. During the war a special commemorative medal had already been planned, but after the liberation in Spring 1945, when it became clear that the resistance movement did not want a medal for its members, the project was quietly shelved (Jørgensen, 2009). The only step taken was the introduction of an honorary gift, essentially modelled on the measures taken after the wars over Slesvig, to the wounded soldiers and the dependants of the fallen soldiers (Retsinformation.dk, 1940). Even today, the question over a medal to the soldiers fighting on 9 April and 29 August is debated in the Danish parliament at infrequent intervals (Krarup, 2016).

While the resistance movement members and the armed forces were celebrated nonetheless with numerous monuments and annual commemorative dates, such as 29 August and 5 May, one group whose members also had seen – at least indirectly – armed action was virtually forgotten: the war sailors. Almost one in six had died during the war, and Danish sea men had not only played a role in manning the ships that ran the gauntlet between German submarines in the Atlantic, but some had also served as crew members on the ships taking part in the Normandy landings in June 1944. The lack of popular – and state – recognition of the deeds of these men probably reflects both that the sailors were seen as essentially non-combatants, and also that the rank-and-file sailors came from the lower segments of society. On top of that, many sailors continued sailing abroad, and thus had limited visibility in Denmark, just as they had no strong organization to represent their interests. Only in 1969 was the above-mentioned legislation, related to those victimized by the war, extended to cover the sailors, and not until 2014 was a monument dedicated to the sailors erected, on Utah Beach in Normandy. In addition, a monument at the memorial complex *Mindelunden* in Ryvangen, devoted to resistance fighters executed by the Germans, has been planned (Arkitektforeningen, 2016).

Following the end of the war, the Danish defence force was only slowly and with considerable difficulty rebuilt, and after 1949 integrated into NATO. Whereas the dominant role of the armed forces during the Cold War was to participate in defending the country against an invasion from the east, Denmark also contributed to UN peacekeeping missions, both by seconding individual officers and by sending out contingents of regular troops, e.g. to Gaza and Cyprus. In addition, between 1948

and 1954, a Danish brigade was stationed in north-western Germany as part of the Allied occupation forces there.

These postings were by and large undramatic and virtually without any occurrence of combat or casualties. Although various small and informal “clubs” were established by the troops returning from the missions mentioned above, these associations were primarily inward-looking and did not really try to influence the greater public, or politicians for that matter. It was during this period that what eventually became the most influential contemporary Danish veteran organization, *De Blå Baretter* (The Blue Berets), was established. Although it was founded in 1968, this association enjoyed a relatively tranquil existence until the early 1990s, primarily serving as a venue for nostalgic and backward-looking activities rather than being a visible veterans' lobby organization.

One of the main reasons for this state of affairs may well have been the general anti-military attitude that characterized Denmark from the early 1960s until the 1980s. There was limited political interest in establishing a veterans' policy. Rather, the decision-makers' attention and energy was consumed by simply maintaining a credible defence force during a time period characterized both by successive periods of economic recession and by ever-growing demands for funding from other sectors. This was also the period during which a Danish welfare state was established in earnest, thus also eroding any need for special measures targeting the material wellbeing of veterans.

As this survey shows, the period 1848-1993 was characterized by a virtual absence of a comprehensive veterans' policy. This development can be explained by several factors. Firstly, the most distinct, popularly acknowledged and well-organized veterans – the *Våbenbrødre* – were active at a time when the state only had limited means at its disposal and when state support of citizens in need was virtually unheard of in Denmark, as well as abroad. In addition, the *Våbenbrødre* failed to put the question of material support for needy veterans on the agenda. Secondly, after 1864 the general population increasingly became alienated from the idea that a small state like Denmark could benefit from the use of military power – forcefully formulated by a leading opinion maker as *Hvad skal det nytte?* (translation: To what end should we defend ourselves?) Thirdly, after 1864 Denmark virtually ceased to produce veterans – at least if we define them as people being sent to war by the Danish state. As the *Våbenbrødre* failed to link up to associations of former conscripts or to open its own ranks to other veterans, such as the Danes who had fought in the Kaiser's army during World War I, no strong veterans' movement ever emerged. During the Cold War there was widespread disbelief that the defence force would ever be used for waging war, and if this did come to pass nonetheless, it was believed that such a war would rapidly escalate into a thermonuclear conflict, thus rendering any idea of a subsequent veterans' policy absurd. Furthermore, at least before the 1990s, Danish troops being sent on peacekeeping missions were generally the laughing-stock of the defence force. These soldiers were seen as holiday fighters whose biggest risk was

getting sunburnt, excessively drunk, or experiencing an accident due to hazardous driving. This negative image of the Danish veterans, together with the establishment of a welfare state with generous benefits to the sick, maladjusted and needy, rendered a veterans policy both inexpedient and unnecessary, at least until the end of the Cold War.

## **2 FROM COLD WAR TO COMBAT MISSIONS: THE GRADUAL EMERGENCE OF THE NOTION OF DANISH WAR VETERANS, 1992-2010**

Considering this background, it is hardly surprising that neither the Danish government, the defence force, nor the population in general realised that the soldiers tasked with peacekeeping missions in former Yugoslavia from 1992 onwards were treading new territory.

The experiences of Danish soldiers in Croatia, and especially in Bosnia-Herzegovina (hereafter “Bosnia”, differed significantly from what soldiers had become used to on missions such as to Cyprus. The more than three years of fighting between the different nationalist armies and paramilitary groups was characterized by an almost total neglect of the rules and customs of war. In contrast to the Cold War conflicts, where United Nations peacekeepers had been deployed and were by and large respected by the parties of the conflicts, events in Croatia and Bosnia showed that neutral peacekeepers could also be targeted by the warring parties – the range of incidents ran from threats and hostage-taking over extensive mining to sniping and shelling. Furthermore, the peacekeepers had to tackle such threats with inadequate mandates informed by their previous missions, where actual fighting had normally ceased and the parties were in the phase of peace negotiations (see for instance Rasmussen, 2014; Burg & Shoup, 1999).

As the war in Bosnia dragged on, it soon became obvious that there was absolutely no peace to keep. In addition, due to the weak mandates, the international peacekeepers could do little when extreme violence was directed toward civilians. The prime example of the Security Council’s inadequate means of response to new types of conflict was the genocide in the Srebrenica enclave in July 1995, in which a Dutch battalion was incapable of stopping the advancing Bosnian Serb units from entering the area and subsequently killing around 8,000 Muslim men and boys. Albeit on a lesser scale, Danish soldiers, in both Croatia and Bosnia, experienced similar events during their deployments between 1992 and 1995 (Rasmussen, 2014). To a certain extent, the situation was repeated when Danish troops were sent to Kosovo in 1999. However, dramatic as they were, events in the Balkans were surpassed by what happened when Danish contingents from 2001 and 2003 respectively, were seconded to Afghanistan and Iraq; in contrast to the missions in the Balkans, the missions in Afghanistan and Iraq were actual combat deployments.

Thus, from 1992 onwards an almost uninterrupted stream of soldiers returned from “hot missions abroad”, and in 2009 it was estimated that Danish soldiers had served almost 60,000 tours of duty abroad since the end of the Cold War.<sup>1</sup> During the last two decades, Denmark has thus experienced a significant change in its political willingness to use military force, accompanied by an equally remarkable shift in how the population perceives the military. Following activities in Afghanistan and Iraq, it has become somewhat more publically acknowledged that casualties accompany participation in war. Between 2002 and 2014, Denmark suffered 43 casualties – the highest national rate in the ISAF force relative to population size.

Both politicians and the population responded to the severe fighting and the high number of casualties with remarkable tolerance. Seen in the context of decades-long scepticism towards using the military instrument, this signified a remarkable change in the role and visibility of the armed forces in society (Jakobsen, 2004). Another, related, change was on its way, too: the notion of Danish war veterans. Until the late 1990s, how to care for former servicemen was something contemporary Danes associated with American Vietnam war movies. But now a number of popular initiatives appeared. A yellow ribbon calling for the support of “our soldiers” was introduced in 2007 by a newly established association for family members of soldiers deployed on international missions (Hornemann, 2009). The bumper-sticker version rapidly gained visibility and appeared on a large number of vehicles across the country. In less than a decade this and other steps to honour the veterans developed into an elaborate body of official and semi-official measures, including almost a dozen different associations related to war veterans. On 5 September 2009, the nation celebrated its first national flag day to celebrate both veterans and those who are currently deployed. One year later the first-ever Danish veterans’ policy was adopted, and in 2011 a major national monument, dedicated to Denmark’s fallen in international military missions since 1945, was inaugurated.

It is safe to claim that prior to Denmark’s decision to deploy troops to Afghanistan, following 11 September 2001, there was limited public awareness of the fact that more and more Danish soldiers were returning from missions in warlike conditions abroad. It is instructive that the word “veteran” was virtually absent from public discourse at the time and only came into use as a term for Danish soldiers returning from abroad during the 2000s.

Likewise, the actual term “war veteran” or simply “veteran” only appeared in earnest in parliamentary debates after the adoption of the veterans’ policy in 2010.<sup>2</sup> It was therefore not until the spring of 2011, when MP Holger K. Nielsen, from the leftist *Socialistisk Folkeparti* (the Socialist People’s Party), asked the MoD a question about economic compensation to “war veterans”, that the term entered parliamentary

<sup>1</sup> This figure does not, however, represent the total number of veterans, as a considerable number of personnel completed more than one tour of duty.

<sup>2</sup> Based on a search of the official records of the parliament at <http://www.ft.dk/>.

debates (Question no. S 1677, 2011). The only exception was a debate from 2009 in which MPs discussed the possibility of establishing a “veterans’ home” (Question no.1591, 2009).

While some debate about the well-being of returning soldiers had taken place in parliament during the Yugoslav wars of succession, it was clearly the much more “warlike” missions in Afghanistan and Iraq which ignited a much deeper popular and political interest in Denmark’s homecoming soldiers. In contrast to the discussions during, and in the immediate aftermath of, the Balkan missions of the 1990s and early 2000s, a novel feature characterized the new discussions: the preventive element; the focus on preventing occurrences of PTSD was reflected in several inquiries to the MoD. For instance, in February 2003 MP Villy Søvndal – also from *Socialistisk Folkeparti* – posed the following question to the minister:

Does the minister intend to inform the Danish soldiers who are to be sent to the war in Iraq that previously deployed [soldiers] have returned with diseases that in public debates are referred to as “the Gulf Syndrome”? (Question no. S 2090, 2003).

While the quotes above concern purely clinical issues related to international deployments, the discussions following Afghanistan and Iraq also took a rather socio-economic turn. This was reflected later in 2006, when MP Holger K. Nielsen asked the MoD the following question:

“What initiatives does the minister intend to undertake in order to ensure that relatives of deployed soldiers who die or incur debilitating injuries during deployment avoid falling into economic hardship as a result of the Danish Defence’s inadequate compensation regulations?” (Nielsen, 2006)

This review of Danish debates on the status of Danish soldiers returning from international missions points to a general tendency: discussions about veterans seem to have been dependent on Danish participation in a new type of mission beginning in the early 2000s. That they triggered growing public and political interest in the matter was probably due to a combination of factors. First of all, these missions were much more violent than previous ones, thus resulting in more casualties and a greater number of veterans in need of physical rehabilitation. In addition to a number of soldiers developing psychological problems following participation in Iraq and Afghanistan, it was also at about this time that it became clear to the public that some of the soldiers who had been posted to the Balkans during the 1990s were suffering from mental health problems. Thirdly, it deserves mention that Denmark’s participation in the American-led war against Iraq in 2003 severely divided politicians. Although all politicians spoke in a pro-veteran discourse, one cannot avoid wondering whether the increased focus on the veterans’ wellbeing by some of the politicians who were against the war in Iraq was a subtle attempt to delegitimize the war.

### 3 THE FORMULATION OF DENMARK'S VETERAN POLICY IN 2010

In October 2010, the Danish government adopted the country's first-ever national veteran policy. The adoption of the 2010-2014 defence agreement, which preceded the veteran policy, was backed by all parties except for *Enhedslisten* (the Unity List) – a socialist party known for its opposition to the country's armed forces. The period surrounding the adoption of the policy triggered some interesting public debates regarding veterans' position in Danish society, as well as debates about the need to offer veterans special treatment in a number of areas. These debates could be observed in both press and parliamentary settings. The following section will focus on the discussions in the press.

It was during 2008 that the idea of formulating a national veteran policy gained momentum.<sup>3</sup> It seems that the debate was pushed forward by individuals and not as a result of extensive group mobilization “from below”. Among the most noteworthy of these individuals was MP Jørgen Poulsen from the ultra-liberal party *Ny Alliance* (New Alliance), the former secretary general of the Danish chapter of the International Red Cross. In April 2008, Poulsen commented harshly on how the Danish population as a whole and the government in particular responded to being at war. According to Poulsen, Danes simply did not realize that Denmark was now a belligerent nation. This was due to the nation's lack of military experience in the past, which had resulted in a non-existent “culture of war and veterans”:

“Other countries that are more experienced belligerent nations have a system that gives the impression that it is not only soldiers who go to war but the whole nation. (...) There is a need for the [Danish] government to implement a genuine veteran policy. (...) [W]e have generally failed in developing a culture in which we as a nation express our appreciation of the effort that the soldiers make and the sacrifices that some soldiers face, as well as the grief that this causes their families” (Poulsen, 2008).

Poulsen's comments brought to light exactly what seems to have been the challenge for Denmark at this point; the almost complete lack of war experience from 1864 up until the 1990s had left the country (and its politicians) in a peculiar situation: the nation as a whole had virtually no experience with “modern veterans” and absolutely no knowledge of the challenges associated with returning war veterans.

Following almost a decade of continuous participation in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, public debates intensified between 2009 and 2010, one of the main points of contention being whether disabled war veterans should be given preferential treatment. Members from the *Dansk Folkeparti* and *Venstre* argued in a major Danish newspaper that veterans should enjoy special treatment in Danish society. They argued, “that those folks who have fought for ideals enjoy special rights, or at least they ought to” (Kingsey, 2009). A high-ranking member of the largest

<sup>3</sup> A survey of the media by means of the Danish news media search engine INFOMEDIA.dk indicates that there was absolutely no media coverage of the subject prior to 2008.

opposition party at that time, *Socialdemokraterne*, used the same rhetoric in the same article (Kingsey, 2009). However, not all parties in parliament shared this view. The parliamentary party speakers on disability politics from *Det Radikale Venstre* and *Socialistisk Folkeparti* argued against secluding Danish veterans from the general health system and establishing a privileged system for them. They argued that even though veterans constituted a “special group” who should be offered services related to their needs, it would be an improper move if the Danish government decided to start treating its citizens differently – even though some of them had served in international military missions (B. dk, 2009).

It was not only politicians who tried to impact the debate prior to the adoption of the veteran policy in 2010. Other actors within the military forces, former officers and NGOs also had their say in the debate. Bjarne Hesselberg, then president of *De Blå Baretter*, argued in late 2009 that Danish society was obliged to offer special treatment for its veterans because it had sent them to war:

“Society has to define for itself what commitments it has towards the soldiers and their families before and after a deployment. Society is designed to take care of citizens who live in Denmark (...); now we will see problems [related to war veterans] arising because of policies decided by a majority in parliament.” (Svendsen, 2009).

Directly asked whether Danish society should establish a kind of parallel health and welfare system geared towards veteran care, Hesselberg argued that:

“(...) if the soldier returns with a disability and is ready to get back to life, to rehabilitation and disability housing, which the municipal system cannot offer at the moment, there is a need for an extraordinary allocation [of resources] compared to other disabled people. You might call that a parallel system.” (Svendsen, 2009).

Finally, Hesselberg argued that the main argument in favour of special treatment of veterans lies in the soldier’s profession:

“You can have a political opinion on whether Iraq, Afghanistan or the Balkans were a good idea. The soldiers who are deployed can privately assess whether they agree or not, but they do what a parliamentary majority has asked them to do.” (Svendsen, 2009).

The discussions on how to treat Danish veterans also caused representatives from Danish disability NGOs to take part in the debate. Susanne Olsen, president of *Dansk Handicap Forbund*, agreed with Hesselberg that veterans constituted a special societal group and *could* be entitled to special treatment (Kingsey, 2009). However, it is interesting to note that, six months later, Susanne Olsen radically changed her opinion. Following a comment by Colonel Lars R. Møller in March 2010, that veterans should enjoy preferential treatment when it came to certain clinical services, Susanne Olsen made the following statement in a Danish newspaper:

“(…) I think it is unacceptable that a military commander demands special status for soldiers by demeaning all other human beings with a disability. It is despicable that we even have to have this discussion. Soldiers should be treated on equal terms and with the same respect as anyone else with the same disability” (Pedersen and Westh, 2010).

It seems that the closer the adoption of the veteran policy came, the more public discussions turned into a battle between different stakeholders about the limited resources allocated to the disability sector.

It is important to note that not all veterans called for treating veterans differently from other citizens, and thereby did not agree with people such as Hesselberg. Debates between the veterans themselves also surfaced a few months before the government adopted the veteran policy. An example of this is Danish veteran Kasper Kiran Larsen, who had lost half of his right arm and all of his right leg. Larsen argued that he thought it would be wrong if society differentiated between injured soldiers and people born with a handicap or someone who had been involved in a traffic accident (Vaaben, 2010). As he stated during an interview:

“I would not like to take somebody else’s place [in the queue], just because he had not been deployed to Afghanistan” (Vaaben, 2010).

On the other hand, the same year a fellow severely handicapped veteran argued in an interview that as he had fought for Denmark in Afghanistan, veterans like him were entitled to special treatment by the Danish authorities (Ravnø et al., 2010). Thus, as in the debate between Danish politicians, the debate between veterans themselves revolved around whether “veterans” were to be seen as a distinct societal group with special privileges, or whether they should be treated in the same way as any other Danish citizen.

This debate by and large ended with the government’s official veterans’ policy in 2010. After uttering the words quoted at the beginning of this article, the prime minister announced that an official veterans’ policy would be adopted very soon, and he concluded with the words, “Our veterans shall be given the necessary support and treatment” (Rasmussen, 2010). This was hardly a revolutionary statement, and when the policy was presented to the public a week later, it essentially represented a consolidation and comprehensive review of existing means and policies, rather than the breaking of new ground (FMN, 2010). The policy was named “recognition and support”, reflecting that these were considered to be the two main aspects of the issue. Among the main innovations in the policy was the establishment of a Veterans’ Centre with subunits in a number of major towns. This centre was to assist the veterans and act as a “single point of entry” – thereby addressing what many veterans believed to be a major problem: the public sector’s tendency to point to another agency when a problem related to veterans needed to be addressed. Another important element in the policy was that physically and mentally disabled

veterans were placed on an equal footing with respect to the rules regulating their right to a disability pension. Funding to veterans' self-help groups and peer-to-peer counselling (i.e. counselling from one veteran to another) was also increased. In terms of recognition much had already taken place prior to the adoption of the policy – the annual flag day had already been established in 2009, and the national monument, which was inaugurated in 2011, had also been decided upon earlier. The most tangible addition to these measures was the introduction of a veteran's card – a credit-card-sized document which attested that the person in question was a war veteran. However, the card in itself carried no privileges with it, and the government had made no initial arrangements with private companies or other non-state actors for providing discounts in restaurants and amusement parks, for example. When the first cards were issued, the Minister of Defence, Gitte Lillelund Bech, merely stated, "I would like to invite private companies, NGOs and public institutions to find new ways of recognising our veterans. It may be free bus rides on national flag day on 5 September, a 10% discount at the auto repair shop, or free access to the town festival; the only limit is your own imagination, and I hope that private initiatives will flourish" (Bech, 2011).

In the autumn of 2016 the veterans' policy was reviewed; without, however, any major changes being introduced, and without substantial popular debate (FNM, 2016). Evidently, all the major political actors and interest groups have bought into the existing, rather modest policy.

**Conclusion** Based on the above background, one might ask why it took Denmark so long to adopt a veterans' policy and why the existing policy is rather a modest one?

This is best explained by a number of historical, cultural and political factors, among which the virtual absence of war since 1864 is the most striking. Following Denmark's increasing involvement in "hot" UN and NATO missions since the end of the Cold War, the notion of Danish "veterans" has resurfaced, both as a political factor and as a subject of study. As demonstrated in this article, virtually all groups of veterans prior to the 1990s have enjoyed rather limited benefits and have in many cases been marginalized. That Denmark suddenly adopted a veterans' policy was fostered by the new missions in the Balkans, Afghanistan and Iraq. These missions created a whole new generation of more vocal war veterans, just as the wars they participated in represented a new type of military engagement for Denmark.

Danish war veterans have, however, not evolved into becoming an entitlement group with the right to special health care or access to substantial social privileges. This may be explained by the existence of a strong welfare state and a relatively well-functioning health care system. More significant is the upsurge in support for the veterans ranging from the large and visible public initiatives, such as the national monument or the flag day, to numerous private initiatives.

It remains to be seen whether we are currently experiencing the peak of Denmark's newfound interest in its veterans. On the one hand, one may argue that the area has been depoliticized, as virtually all parties are subject to the defence agreement and the veteran policy, which was adopted as a result of said agreement. Furthermore, the various veterans' organizations have – save for a number of small and rather inconsequential ones – endorsed the official veterans' policy. It may also be speculated that given that neither the war in Afghanistan nor the war in Iraq resulted in a solid victory, the Danish population and Danish politicians have increasingly become war-weary and there are no indications that we are going to see Danish troop participation in land warfare on a scale equivalent to the period between 2001 and 2014 for years to come. Hence, in the foreseeable future, Denmark is unlikely to produce as many veterans as during the last decade.

Yet, there are also signs that the veteran cause may not fully have run out of steam. First of all, Denmark now has a significant number of its population with “war veteran” written in their CVs, and this part of their identity may actually grow rather than fade over time. Secondly, if we look at such historical cases of severe trauma as concentration camp inmates and Holocaust survivors, it is known that severe psychological problems often only fully emerged decades after returning from the camps. Thus, the current number of cases of maladjusted veterans may only be the tip of the iceberg. In addition, since contemporary Danish culture is considerably influenced by American culture, American ways of honouring war veterans may be adopted as part of the general transfer of culture. An early example of this could be seen when the movie “April 9” was shown for the first time in March 2015. In a gesture quite uncommon to Danish movie audiences (but well known to anybody who has been to a spectator sport in the United States), a Danish veteran from April 9, 1940, who was present in the auditorium, was given a standing ovation.

Although major political adjustments to the current veterans' policy are hardly likely for the foreseeable future, one may conclude that the very fact that Denmark now, for the first time in a century, is home to a significant number of war veterans, means that the last word about how to support and honour the Danish veterans has not yet been spoken.

## Abbreviations

MOD: Ministry of Defence  
 MP: Member of Parliament  
 NATO: North Atlantic Treaty Organization  
 NCO: Non-Commissioned Officer  
 NGO: Non-Governmental Organization  
 PTSD: Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome  
 UN: United Nations

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