

Dear students, teachers, adoptants, and honored guests,

On behalf of the municipality of Eijsden-Margraten, it is my privilege as mayor to welcome you all here today. I extend a special welcome to the students and staff from Omaha Central High School in Nebraska, as well as to the students and teachers from Sophianum in Gulpen. I am also deeply grateful to the adoptants of the graves, whose presence and dedication are at the heart of today's gathering.

Later today, we will stand together in a place that is both local and international—a place that connects our small community here in Limburg with the vast United States of America. The American Cemetery in Margraten is not just a resting place for thousands of brave soldiers; it is a symbol of the enduring friendship between our nations.

What makes this day particularly poignant is the reason for your visit. Six alumni of Omaha Central High School—young men not much older than many of you—gave their lives during World War II and now rest here in Margraten. Their stories are a powerful reminder that history is not something distant or abstract. These soldiers once sat in classrooms, played sports, and dreamed of the future—just as you do now.

Imagine, for a moment, the courage it took for these young men to leave everything familiar behind, to cross an ocean, and to fight for freedom in a land they had never seen. Their sacrifice is not just a chapter in a history book; it is a personal story, one that could have belonged to any of us.

This is why the work of the adoptants is so important. For decades, families and individuals from our community have adopted the graves of these soldiers. They bring flowers, share their stories, and ensure that these young men are never forgotten. The adoptants are the bridge between past and present, between our community and the families across the Atlantic who still mourn their loved ones.

Today, you have the unique opportunity to meet some of these adoptants: Joep Moonen, Frank Delnoij, Patricia Van Casteren, René Stollmann and family, and Serena Cloos. Through their dedication, the memory of Gordon Shotwell, James Stryker, George Herrell, Philip Horan, and Robert Clausen lives on here in Margraten. Although Mark Henssen, the adoptant of John Cottingham, cannot be with us today, his commitment is equally valued.

The bond between America and Eijsden-Margraten is strong, built on shared sacrifice and mutual respect. It is our responsibility to keep this bond alive—not just by remembering the past, but by building connections in the present. This exchange between students from Nebraska and Limburg is a perfect example of how we can learn from each other, honor our shared history, and shape a better future together.

As you walk among the graves later today, share your stories with one another, I hope you will feel the weight of history—but also the hope and promise that comes from understanding and friendship.

Thank you all for being here, for remembering, and for building bridges that will last for generations to come.