

Your excellency, Mrs. Popolo,  
Honored veterans, dear friends,

On behalf of the municipality of Eijsden-Margraten, it is my pleasure and an honor to welcome you all to our town hall for what has become a cherished part of our Memorial Day weekend: the Gratitude and Peace ceremony, a moment of friendship and gratitude.

This ceremony started a few years ago in our beautiful village Mesch, the same place where brave American soldiers crossed our border on the 12<sup>th</sup> of September 1944, which marked the start of the liberation of our country. And now, we are pleased to host this ceremony in our town hall, in order to accommodate more people and provide more comfort, especially to our dearly beloved veterans.

A most special welcome to Arnold and Harry for being here with us today. We thank you from the bottom of our hearts for your service, for your contribution to the liberation of our country, indeed of Europe. And through you, we salute all veterans and all fallen soldiers.

2026 is a special year, since it marks the 250 years of independence of the United States. The friendship between our countries goes way back to the beginning, since the Netherlands was the first country to recognize the young republic across the Atlantic.

Mr. Ambassador, I want to congratulate you on this milestone, and through you the American people. And on a personal level, I want to thank you, Sir, for visiting us so often since you took office less than a year ago and the profound interest you take in the broader field of Liberation. This is highly appreciated, and you and your wife are here among friends.

In Margraten, friendship has taken on a very tangible form. It can be seen in the rows of white marble: each stone carrying a name, a story, a life given. But it is just as present in the care surrounding those graves: in the adopters who visit, who place flowers, and those who remember.

I think of our friendship as made of marble. It is strong, it endures, and it carries memory.

The bond between the United States and the Netherlands is visible here in Margraten, but it is sustained by people. By the adopters, by the families who pass this responsibility from one generation to the next, and by the many volunteers and organizations on both sides of the Atlantic who make these encounters possible.

To all of you: your work often happens quietly, but it matters deeply.

You ensure that remembrance is not only preserved, but lived.

What touches me most is seeing the younger generation stepping forward: sons and daughters, grandsons and granddaughters, taking over the adoption of a grave. I am convinced that they do not see this as an obligation, but as a choice.

Today, as veterans and adopters stand side by side, we see gratitude and friendship come full circle: from those who served to those who remember, from one generation to the next, across time and distance.

Maybe that's the greatest lesson we take with us: when gratitude is shared, it becomes connection. And connection, when sustained, becomes friendship.

Thank you.