

**Toespraak Burgemeester Krijnen Gratitude and Peace ceremonie
gemeentehuis Margraten, 24 mei 2025**

Dear guests,

- Honored veterans, dear friends: It's wonderful to see you again!
- Today you are joined by Mr. Johan Geneuglijk, a Dutch veteran who served our country bravely from the Dutch Royal Navy. As a young man, he experienced the horrors of the Slag in de Javazee, only to continue to serve his country for many years after the war.
- A special welcome to Mr. Marcus Micheli, chargé d'affaires of the United States of America in the Netherlands.
- And of course, to the adoption community and our friends from Mission Margraten Plus.

Welcome all to our town hall at the Amerikaplein, which has been beautifully decorated for this occasion, as is this council chamber.

Last night, we had a great kick-off of this Memorial Day weekend with the concert of the Reünie-orkest Limburgse Jagers, organized by the stichting adoptiegraven. And now, we are gathered in here.

This ceremony has become a yearly ritual: a tribute to the adoption community. However, let us never forget that the custom of grave adoption itself is the expression of a heart-felt thank-you from our community to our liberators, to ensure that the fallen are never forgotten.

I'm sure you've heard about the recent book, 'Remember Us', by the American author Robert M. Edsel. In this book, he tells the story of World War II in Limburg, the American cemetery and the history of grave adoption. As he said:

(...) "It's a story about how we honor people, how we remember them, how we preserve that legacy. It's a high-water mark in humanity as far as I'm concerned, the civility of the Dutch to have the presence of mind and gratitude to honor what we refer to as the 'Forever Promise' to the Americans buried there and their relatives, that they will watch over these graves like their own forever, and they have done it for 80 years."

That is high praise indeed.

This gratitude we feel towards our American Liberators was - and still is - more than earned.

Over the years, we've come to learn so much about what you and your fellow soldiers did for us. Both the historical military facts *and* the personal stories from many brave men and women.

Remarkably, we are still finding *new chapters in our Liberation history*.

- Just before September 12th last year, our celebration of the National start of the Dutch Liberation in Mesch, we came to know about Nora, widow to Leonard Hoffman, who was the first American soldier who was killed in action while crossing the border. Tragically, Nora passed away before we had a chance to talk to her by video. But we did come into contact with her daughter from her second marriage. And via Derrick Deeds, we now know that Nora had never stopped talking about her 'Lenny'. We're looking forward to hear all stories her mom shared with her.

- Another recent addition came to us from Frans Beckers, whose father was a mayor here in Mheer and Banholt in 1944. During the Liberation, American soldiers stayed in the mayors' house, which Frans still remembers, and amongst others, they left some books there. Frans recently donated these books to us, asking if we could put the word out and possibly find new connections and stories. To the historians present here, we can need some help with that!

Over the years, we have seen that those big and small gestures of gratitude have become a mutual exchange, evolving into a deep connection and a lasting friendship.

Two years ago, I received a piece of marble as a gift from you. It has a prominent place in my office, next to the certificate of adoption of the grave of Staff Sergeant Elphie Ledoux, the grave of which we take care for as a municipality. It is of course the same marble that was chosen for the crosses in Margraten, those symbols of eternal remembrance. To me, that small piece of marble is a daily reminder of our friendship.

And just like that piece of marble, I believe that the friendship between our people will endure.

It becomes stronger:

- with each word of thanks,
- with each flower placed on a grave,
- and with each outstretched hand.

I am proud to say that the tradition of grave adoption – as part of our greater Liberation community – is more than alive after 80 years: it is thriving. New adopters are joining in, and the tradition is being passed down to the youngest generation – intentionally, lovingly.

It is this tradition and the friendships that have sprung from it, that keep us connected: they are the threads that bind us together, fostering understanding among people across place and time, on both sides of the Atlantic.

As we pass down these treasured connections to future generations, we empower them with the wisdom and values they need to live together in peace in an ever-changing world.

Thank you.