

**Toespraak Burgemeester Krijnen Memorial Day receptie
gemeentehuis Margraten, 25 mei 2025**

Your excellencies, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

I am deeply honored to welcome you here to our town hall, as is our custom, following the Memorial Day ceremony.

It is more than fitting that we are gathered here: our municipality is home to **the only American cemetery in the Netherlands**. Like president George W. Bush stated during his visit to Margraten in 2005: “For the Americans who rest here, Dutch soil provides a fitting home.”

Our two countries share a centuries-old bond, from the founding of New York, or New Amsterdam as it was called then, to the First Salute in 1776. A bond rooted in the shared values of democracy, rule of law, freedom and human rights.

On the 12th of September 1944, our small village of Mesch was the first part of The Netherlands to be liberated by the American troops. Last year, we celebrated this historic fact, the National start of 80 years of freedom. A beautiful and happy moment, in the presence of World War II veterans and our King and Queen.

And today we are here, coming full circle as the 80th celebration of the Liberation of our country is ending, celebrating this Memorial Day weekend 2025 with you. The *only* Memorial Day celebration of its kind in Europe.

Ladies and gentlemen,

There is another reason why it is undeniably apt that we are gathered here. And that reason is: **friendship**, born out of gratitude.

80 years ago, the Dutch people here started a tradition that gave meaning to the concept of gratitude to our American liberators. I'm speaking, of course, of the tradition of grave adoption.

One day in 1945, Jef van Laar, a civil servant and a member of the Dutch resistance, was at the newly constructed cemetery in Margraten, when he came to speak with an army captain. This captain asked Jef to keep an eye out for the grave of his nephew, Lieutenant Land, as his unit moved on. Jef accepted and soon he was asked to care for more graves, and more local people quickly joined him. Jef became the first unofficial grave adopter.

Just one year later, during Memorial Day 1946, all graves were adopted.

Today, eight decades later, citizens from Eijsden-Margraten and elsewhere continue to take care of all 8301 graves and the 1722 names on the wall of the missing. 'As if they were their own', as the author Robert M. Edsel puts it.

Out of gratitude, friendship grew between adopters here and the families of the fallen overseas.

And each generation passed this on to the next: from grandparents, to parents, to children and *their* children. Remarkably, these are friendships that are continued by people, on either side of the ocean, who haven't experienced World War II themselves.

The first liberated region of the Netherlands, the hospitality that Limburg is known for, the gratitude of a people: it all resulted in a unique and enduring custom of grave adoption.

A custom that has since been designated under UNESCO guidelines as a part of the Dutch National Inventory of Immaterial Cultural Inheritance. *It is here to stay.*

And with the tradition of grave adoption as a catalyst, many stories have been uncovered in the last 80 years.

- I must name the work of Peter Schrijvers, whose book *The Margraten Boys* tells the history of the cemetery and grave adopters.
- Another author, Jefferson Wiggins, shed a light on the experiences of the Black Liberators who were grave diggers in Margraten.
- Local initiatives like The Fields of Honor Foundation have been instrumental in uncovering new stories, and putting faces and personal histories to the names carved in marble.
- Crucially, many stories we have today would not have been preserved without the excellent cooperation from the ABMC, the American Battle Monuments Commission, as well as the unique network of adopters, and its wonderful managing Foundation.

And with all that, a Liberation community emerged with many contributors, such as:

- The Old Hickory Association, the Red Horse re-enactment group, the Sighting Belgisch monument, the Children of Black Liberators, writers, artists and volunteers.
- The Bevrijdingscomité Mesch and our friends at Mission Margraten Plus.

- The Stichting Eerbetoone Netherlands American Cemetery and Memorial, who - with the ABMC - provides us with the yearly Liberation concert, a musical tribute to the fallen.

As a mayor, I am immensely proud of such a thriving Liberation community.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The Dutch people will be forever grateful for the sacrifices Americans and our allies made during World War II to liberate our country.

The people here have been giving substance to this gratitude, together with our American friends.

And we will proudly continue to do so - with all of our heart.

Thank you.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I have a final thing to say, before you can all return to your conversations and enjoy our famous hospitality. First of all, may I ask you for a big applause for my team, who organized this reception, as well as yesterdays Gratitude and Peace ceremony. What a great job they did!

But now, I would like to ask ABMC Director Spoehr and Acting Superintendent Dakir to come forward.

The Netherlands American Cemetery and Memorial has been of immense significance to our municipality, to the province of Limburg and to our country.

It's unique in every possible way. It's the jewel in the crown of our municipality.

For more than 80 years, the adoption program has been inextricably linked to the American Cemetery. It has gained international renown.

The yearly Liberation Concert is the only musical tribute held at any of the ABMC cemeteries and memorials.

Added to that is the recently opened visitor center, providing education and information to the large numbers of people, young and old, Dutch or American, visiting each year.

None of this would be possible without the impeccable management by the ABMC and the cooperation with numerous institutions and partners.

And so, for the long and valued relationship, which for decades now has linked people from various generations on both sides of the Atlantic,

for the significance of the cemetery to our municipality and our community,

and given the dedicated work of the ABMC as managing organization and of the people working there,

it is my great honor on behalf of the municipality of Eijsden-Margraten to present the Netherlands American Cemetery and Memorial with our highest municipal honor: our golden decoration.