

## Toespraak burgemeester Krijnen Memorial day receptie 24 mei 2026

### 1. Welkom

Your excellencies, distinguished guests, dear friends,

What we have just seen is a first look, an introduction, in addition to how we remember.

We have become so used to how it is to live in freedom, that we have forgotten how it feels to lose one's freedom. This presentation reveals a new way of experiencing, by the youngest generation.

On this solemn Memorial day, as every year, we think of the consequences of war, of the ultimate sacrifice by so many young American soldiers, more than 80 years ago now. It's because of them, that we are able to gather here today in freedom.

In our municipality, remembrance has never been something distant. It is something people actively engage in.

## 2. Geschiedenis

For more than eighty years, relatives, veterans, dignitaries and ordinary citizens have gathered here in Margraten. What began in the final months of war has grown into a tradition, a part of who we are as a community.

The first graves in Margraten were laid in November 1944. Captain Joseph Shomon, tasked with establishing an American cemetery, came to the town hall of Margraten with a request. Mayor Ronckers agreed, and what was once a fruit orchard became a resting place for thousands of fallen liberators.

As the liberation of this part of Europe stalled, troops remained in the region. Local families opened their homes, offering food and shelter. Friendships were formed. And as the fighting went on and more graves were needed, local people assisted in digging the graves, side by side with the African American Quartermaster troops.

That spirit did not end with the war. In the spring of 1945, local families began adopting graves. A tradition was born that continues to this day.

### 3. Levende connectie benadrukken a.d.h.v. graf ceremonie

A few weeks ago, I was invited to join an American family visiting the grave of their grandfather, Thomas Bica, for the very first time.

Thomas was born in Italy and emigrated to the United States as a young boy. He enlisted while living in Massachusetts and served in the 30<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, known as the 'Old Hickory' Division. In 1944, at the age of 29, he was killed in action in Germany, leaving behind a wife and infant son.

At the cemetery, the family was welcomed with great care by the good people of the ABMC. They received the records that tell his story.

Together with the Dutch family who has adopted his grave, "familie Duits" from "Oesj", we walked to Thomas' resting place.

With sand collected from Omaha Beach, the marble headstone was gently rubbed, revealing the letters of his name. Flowers and our two flags were placed, and we stood there in silence.

At that moment, something became very clear.

That this is not only remembrance. This is connection, regardless of time and place.

It's about a family discovering that, even after all those years, they were never alone in remembering.

#### 4. Betekenisgeving

To the Liberators present today, Arnold and Harry: it is once again a privilege to welcome you here, as our longtime friends. I have learned that many of you felt that you were 'just doing your duty'. But what you did, and what your families carried, made it possible for Europe to return to freedom and democracy after years of oppression.

We commemorate this, year after year:

- On the 12th of September, in Mesch, where the Liberation of the Netherlands began.
- During the Liberation Concert, held on the cemetery grounds—this year for the twentieth time.
- And during Memorial Day weekend, when families of the fallen, grave adopters and people from both sides of the Atlantic connect.

These are moments where we keep our shared history alive.

#### 5. Over voornemen 'beleving/educatie'

I think all of us can agree that we have a responsibility in that respect: we have to ensure that the actions of our liberators continue to have meaning. We owe that to Arnold and Harry, to all other veterans still with us and to the ones we have just remembered at the cemetery. Because the world reminds us, now maybe more than ever, that peace and freedom can never be taken for granted.

Our gratitude is profound, but it is not enough to simply look back. In a world once again marked by wars and conflicts, by tensions and uncertainty, remembrance must become responsibility. We owe it to those who came before us, and to those who will follow, to defend the values for which they gave their lives: freedom, democracy and the rule of law. Let us therefore remember with gratitude, and act with resolve.

So, we have to evolve the ways in which we share our history. If we want future generations to understand what living in freedom means, we have to do *more* than tell them.

We have to involve them, educate them, in a way that connects the past to their own lives.

What does living in freedom ask of you? Do you speak up when you see injustice, or is it safer to be silent? What would you do if freedom were no longer certain?

What you just saw in the presentation, is part of that effort.

Thanks to our municipal council and the Vfonds (a national fund for peace, freedom, and veterans' care), we are now able to explore 'if and how' we can create an educational experience in Eijsden-Margraten. An experience that does justice to our history and that invites reflection and dialogue among younger generations. We hope to update you on this initiative in September.

## 6. Afsluiting/celebrating friendship

If there is one thing we know, it is this: remembrance matters most when it is lived.

In the way we gather, in the way we listen, and in the way we choose to stand by each other.

For 250 years, the friendship between our nations has been tested and true.

And here in Eijsden-Margraten, it is both our foundation and our future.

Today, we remember.

Tomorrow, we keep on building.

Thank you.