

Toespraak van de minister van Defensie, E. van Middelkoop, ter gelegenheid van de herdenking op de Amerikaanse militaire begraafplaats Margraten op 30 mei 2010 te Margraten.

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**Let op: Alleen gesproken woord geldt!**

**Your Majesty, Secretary of Veterans  
Affairs Shinseki, relatives of the  
fallen American soldiers, veterans,  
distinguished guests,**

**When I was sixteen years old, I set  
out on my first independent summer  
holiday. I took my bike and –  
together with my best friend – went  
south on a cycling trip.**

**We visited Belgium. We visited  
France. But my most vivid memory  
of that first holiday on my own is  
our stop here, at Margraten War  
Cemetery.**

**As I stood here as a young man, I was impressed. Impressed by events that had taken place twenty years previously. For me, at the age of sixteen, these soldiers had fallen a long time ago. This war was history.**

**It is something of a paradox, but time has brought Margraten closer to me. Growing older, I realised that it is also part of my history, and now I see this hallowed ground with different eyes.**

**Now, having sent soldiers on a mission, I know these soldiers had their own childhood dreams.**

**Now, having had soldiers killed in action, I know the lives of their loved ones were changed forever.**

**I know now, that behind every one of these eight-thousand three-hundred-and-one white headstones we see here, there is a story.**

**Stories of hope, ideals, friendship and the determination to strive for a better world. Like the young Eimert van Middelkoop on his bike twenty years later, they had their future in the palm of their hands.**

**Like Private Fred Farris who one afternoon in March 1944, closed his business in St. Joseph, Missouri,**

**and walked up the street to the main post office and volunteered for infantry duty. To fight for his country, as he told his mother.**

**Private Farris fought his way across France, Belgium, Holland and into Germany with the Old Hickory Division, the Workhorse of the Western Front. His platoon was ambushed and Farris was killed in action on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of October 1944. He is buried here at Margraten in Plot A, Row Five, Grave Nine.**

**Like Private First Class Walter C. Wetzel from Huntington, West Virginia of the 8<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, who threw himself onto two German**

**grenades to shield his colleagues from the explosion. Private First Class Wetzel received the Medal of Honour and rests here in Plot N, Row Eighteen, Grave Ten.**

**Like Private William F. Davis of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division. A brave paratrooper from Newport, Virginia, who jumped during Operation Market Garden to outflank the German enemy. He died under unknown circumstances, far away from home. Private Davis rests here in Plot G, Row Four, Grave Five.**

**The stories of Privates Farris, Wetzel and Davis are the stories of the eight-thousand three-hundred-**

**and-one American soldiers who  
were laid to rest here in honour.  
Their stories share but one ending.  
In their family homes back in the  
United States, the star in the  
window turned from gold to blue.  
Indicating that a son, brother or  
husband had died in the service of  
their country and the ideals for  
which it stands.**

**These stories also tell a greater  
story.**

**The story of America's brave  
soldiers who came to the other side  
of the ocean.**

**To fight against terror.**

**To fight against oppression.**

**To fight against the merciless  
persecution and annihilation of  
millions of Jews, gypsies, the  
mentally ill and anyone who  
resisted Adolf Hitler's obsession for  
*Blut und Boden*.**

**Thanks to their resolve, the  
oppressor was stopped and the  
Netherlands – indeed Europe - was  
liberated.**

**To these soldiers, we are forever  
grateful.**

**We honour their names.**

**We honour their memory.**

**We honour their relatives and fellow  
soldiers present here today.**

**Many of the soldiers who fell, rest here at Margraten, some Known But to God.**

**I stood at the grave of an unknown soldier, in our spring holiday just a few weeks ago, when I privately visited Margraten with my wife.**

**At that grave, I saw fresh flowers delicately resting on the pristine white headstone. It touched me to see someone had made an effort for this unknown man. It made him less unknown.**

**It made me realise you lose a little of your anonymity if you are given a gift by someone else.**



**Those flowers also made me realise the depth of the word of the Lord in the book of the prophet Isaiah from the Old Testament (49:16). And I quote: 'Behold, I have graven you on the palms of my hands'.**

**These men may have died alone and unknown.**

**But they are not entirely unknown.**

**They are known to Him.**

**Even in the darkest hour,**

**He knows our name.**

**Mr Shinseki,**

**These American soldiers, and the veterans who are here today, gave us back our freedom.**

**The Dutch government has always felt it its duty to use this freedom to do the right thing. To prevent such a war from ever repeating itself. That is why we were at the forefront of founding NATO.**

**And that is why - as the only country in the world - we amended our Constitution to say we will promote the international rule of law.**

**Since the Second World War we have taken part in many peacekeeping operations, including Lebanon, the former Yugoslavia and Afghanistan.**

**Together with the United States and other Allies, we work to further safety and stability around the world.**

**It is our obligation to do so. Now and into the future.**

**It is our obligation to defend the legacy of these soldiers.**

**The legacy to strive for freedom and justice for all.**

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