

Speech commemorating the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Grave, 17 September 2019.

By Mayor Roolvink.

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Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls,

On behalf of the municipal council of Grave I would like to welcome you all to our commemoration today. I would also like to extend a particular welcome to our honoured guests:

- *Cloe and James Gavin – daughter and son of general James Gavin*
- *Patricia Cox – daughter of a pilot who crashed in Groesbeek*
- *Col. Max Sears – representative of the embassy of the United States of America*
- *Maj. Rich Ingleby – representative of the 82^e Airborn Division*
- *Men and women of the 82nd AB 504 – stuk of 30 militairen van nu*
- *Maarten Dekkers – of the museum in Groesbeek*
- *Members of the Vereniging voormalig marinepersoneel*
- *Veterans, young and old*

Every year on the 17th of September we commemorate the liberation of Grave. As we do so, we remember the courageous men and women who gave their lives to liberate Grave from Nazi oppression. At the same time, we also celebrate the freedom we regained. This year, our celebrations are more poignant, as it is exactly 75 years since Grave was liberated. Large parts of the Netherlands had to wait many more months till their liberation on the 5th of May 1945. And, if we consider the whole of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, the Dutch Indies were not liberated until August 1945.

However, thanks to the allied forces in Operation Market Garden, the citizens of Grave were able to enjoy freedom so much earlier.

Over previous years, we have shared many moments of respectful reflection here, at this monument, as well as during the national remembrance ceremonies in the centre of our small town. These events were often attended by veterans, men and women, who actually fought here. Together with them, we shared many poignant moments of commemoration and remembrance. Now, most of those who actually took part in the fight for our freedom are no longer with us. And we are many decades further with so many developments on the national and international stage. With the exception of the Balkan War, Europe has enjoyed years of peaceful existence. And this has led us to look differently at acts of commemoration and celebration such as these. What I particularly appreciate about the way we commemorate here in the Netherlands is that we increasingly look to the future. In the past, we would reflect with sadness on those who were taken from us by war.

However, slowly but surely, we are beginning to realise that their sacrifice would have been in vain if we in turn failed to learn the lessons from the past. And this is something we need to do, in particular, with those who were once our enemies. Grave is not alone in this view of remembrance. In fact, for many years now several municipalities, in particular those close to the border with Germany, have involved German representatives in their acts of commemoration. And this is something that continues to increase; which I believe is a positive development.

This is also a development that we are seeing throughout the Netherlands. In March 1994, The Dutch national daily newspaper, Trouw, published an article expressing the concerns of the Dutch military and resistance organisations against involving Germans in acts of commemoration and celebration on the 4th and 5th of May each year.

Although there were some, including youth organisations, who welcomed the involvement of Germans at such events, the general sentiment was that this was something not to be encouraged. The spokeswoman for the Anne Frank Stichting, Teresien Da Silva stated that it was “too soon”. Her words appear to reflect a broader-held view. In fact, more recently, in 2014, research carried out by the Dutch television programme 1Vandaag concluded that 57% of the Dutch population have no objection to including fallen German soldiers in our act of remembrance.

To avoid any risk of confusion there, we are referring to ordinary soldiers, young men and even boys, who were sent to war against their will by the Nazis, and who can also be considered as victims. And why should we not extend our horizons further?

In the IJsselstein cemetery in Limburg, lie thirty-two-thousand Germans, who lost their lives during the Second World War. This cemetery has no fewer than one-thousand-three-hundred-and-seventy-five child soldiers under the age of 18. The youngest was just 14 years old. In the same cemetery there also lie several civilian, mainly women and children who fled to the Netherlands and were killed here. They include 2 babies: a boy of 6 weeks and one who was just one day old. Why should a meaningful act of remembrance not also include German victims like these?

Remembrance is necessary. The same research I mentioned also concluded that no fewer than almost 90% of the Dutch population believes the annual act of remembrance should continue. And now, after seventy-five years, when most of those actively involved in the Second World War are no longer with us, when global changes mean that good relations between countries and peoples is more important than ever - let alone with our neighbours -, now the question is being asked if we shouldn't devote more attention to a joint act of remembrance.

Please don't get me wrong here: it is not for government, and certainly not for me, to decide who you commemorate. However, perhaps I may ask that you take this opportunity to put yourself in someone else's position for a moment. Personally, I believe that it would be good thing if, at future commemoration events here in Grave, we were to also involve a German representative. I would therefore like to appeal to the committee that organises these events to seriously consider this possibility. Of course, we must continue to remember. But the time is now ripe to also look to the future **together**.

A few months ago, in my role as chairman of the Dutch Archery Federation, I attended the European archery championship in Doorwerth, a town near Arnhem. There, I started chatting to a German man I hadn't met before. And, as is often the case with such a discussion, we talked mainly about trivial matters. But when we moved on to talking about the beautiful location for the event, the tone of our conversation changed. The man visibly struggled as he recalled the war, and said that the Germans had behaved terribly in the area. He apologised for the actions of his compatriots.

The man himself was too young to have been personally involved, but apparently the sense of guilt towards the Netherlands is so deep that he felt the need to make this apology. I shook his hand and suggested we both look to the future together. The man gave a sigh of relief and we parted friends. A brief anecdote, but one that I believe is an example for the situation today. We must continue to commemorate what happened in the past. However, we should also see that on the German side a transformation has been realised. It is now Germany that is leading Europe, and striving to create a safe and stable future for all nations and peoples.

Commemorate? Certainly! But ensuring we take the lessons we have learnt from the past and no longer turn our back on our former enemies. Today, seventy-five years on, the time is ripe. And please remember, it is precisely in facing the future together that we pay the ultimate tribute to those who gave their lives for a safe and free Europe. Their sacrifice will then not have been in vain.

Thank you.