

75 Jaar bevrijding Brunssum 19 september 2019 in Theater Brikke Oaewe te Brunssum

Ambassador, General, Mayor,
Representatives of the Allies,
Families of the fallen,
Ladies and gentlemen,

A new monument to Leonard Hoffmann, the first Allied liberator to die on Dutch soil,

that was unveiled exactly a week ago in Mesch, the very first village in Limburg, in the Netherlands to be liberated.

It was an impressive ceremony. Especially as it was in the presence of surviving veterans of the American Old Hickory division, of which Leonard was a member.

As soon as these Americans set foot on our soil, they seemed to be advancing very successfully through Limburg...

...Within two days, Maastricht was the first city in the country to be liberated, and just a week later it was Brunssum's turn.

And there were celebrations...

And did Dick van Lierop and Jo Heesbeen have any sisters who took part?

I don't know.

But I do know that a newspaper published an appeal to girls to preserve their dignity, and not to beg for any tasty treats.

This was because the one who made this appeal heard a five-year-old boy literally ask his mother: and I quote:

"Mommy, can't you go out with Americans?

If you do,

you'll get cigarettes and sweets!

Or isn't that allowed if you're married?"

End of quote.

Ladies and gentlemen, of course there were celebrations. Especially as the liberation here in South Limburg generally went smoothly and speedily.

But unfortunately, that smoothness and speed soon disappeared.

It eventually took six months before the whole of Limburg was liberated. And the liberation of Central and Northern Limburg was in no way a celebration...

...In fact, the liberation was often more of a hell than the occupation...

Our fellow-Limburgers suffered a great deal;

Like:

- The **continuous** shelling and destruction; entire villages and towns – such as Roermond and Venlo – were shot to pieces;
- and the **continuous** hunt for men and boys. With the Great Church-Raid (de Grote Kerk Razzia) as the absolute low point.

On that eighth of October, thousands of Limburg men were picked from Sunday masses and put on transport to German war factories... many of them did not return;

- and the **continuous** threat of evacuation and then finding your house completely destroyed and plundered. The Limburgers on the eastern bank of the Meuse also knew that this evacuation had to take place over German territory – in trains that were under fire.

Tens of thousands of fellow-Limburgers actually had to endure that dangerous journey.

And in the meantime, many liberators also lost their lives for our freedom.

Mook – a village in the far **north** of Limburg – also has its own Leonard Hoffman. Here his name is **Antonio Barbaro**.

A Canadian corporal working with his division on a Bailey bridge across the Meuse. He drowns when his boat leaks because of the enormous current of that moment.

He gave the only two life jackets to his two comrades who couldn't swim.
He said he would be fine..

But he didn't make it, the current was too strong....

It is the 15th of February 1945, just a few days after the entire northern tip of our province has been liberated.

A liberation that cost a lot of fighting, destruction and victims, both among civilians and among our liberators; here American, British and Canadian.

Mook proclaimed Antonio Barbaro the icon for all those war victims.

In the **west** of our province - in **Thorn** - it were the Belgians and Luxembourgers of the Piron Brigade who will forever be held in high esteem.

They liberated this beautiful White Town of Thorn on the 25th of September 1944, but then it becomes an enormous struggle to keep it free...

A very hard battle that will last until mid-November. It costs the brigade **twenty-five men**...

They, too, were rightly given a monument.

"As a lasting remembrance of those liberators who sacrificed their young lives for the liberation of Thorn",

that's what it says on this monument, above those 25 names. The bond with the brigade still exists.

(And today, as I am with you, the official ceremony of remembrance will take place at the same time)

And in **Sint Joost** – **east** of the River Meuse that flows from south to north through our province - it is the British who are and remain the eternal heroes.

They fought in hell, as an eyewitness would later describe the liberation...

It was terrible.

Underground the civilians were hiding and praying; even if they weren't religious...

...and above ground, the village turned into a sea of fire, with house-to-house fighting, in man-to-man battles.

Three days and three nights long...

Here, too, those who fought and died for our freedom were given a monument. There were **seventeen**, the last one was also called Leonard...

He died on the 21th of January 1945; one hundred and thirty-one days after the first Leonard who died for us.

And so Limburg has many monuments from south to north; from west to east. Many monuments to all those different nationalities that brought us freedom at that time.

And you heard what Donna March Peery – as the daughter of one of the liberators of Brunssum – just said about it in the video: "thank you for remembering all those soldiers."

But of course we owe far more thanks. Our thanks to her father who fortunately survived our liberation; and to those who did not.

They gave us their greatest sacrifice with their lives, leaving their families, loved ones and friends behind in deep mourning.

Families of the fallen need to know that we have never forgotten their loved ones; and will never do so...

It is also for this reason that we are still erecting new monuments like we did last week in Mesch; and today Brunssum is granting honorary citizenship to all those British liberators who found their final resting place here.

It is also for this reason that we are celebrating 75 years of liberation here, in Limburg, in the Netherlands, so extensively.

And I would like to repeat what I said last week in Mesch,

We are celebrating not only to celebrate, but above all to realise how important it is to remain free.

- To remain free from ideas that put one person above another;

- to remain free from the evil that lies mainly in extremes;
- to remain free from domination and intimidation,

to name just a few of the 'challenges' we are facing together.

Together and not alone,
without another person having to give his life,
as so many of our liberators did then...

So that we – as written on another Limburg liberation monument in Kerkrade –

"so that we may remain worthy of that freedom"

But I would also like to repeat the words of Tony Jaber.

His words about war.

I quote:

"To me a war has always been a waste of talents, a waste of lives, a waste of materials.

There are other ways, I think, that they can settle differences without going to war and killing people.

Every time I saw a dead person – whether it was a German or an American – I felt sorry for him.

Because it should not have happened;
but it did happen."

And Tony Jaber should know.

He is one of those surviving veterans of the American Old Hickory division, of which Leonard Hoffman was a member.

Leonard, the very first Allied liberator who fell for our freedom. And unfortunately not the last...

But I promise to all families of the fallen and Allied representatives present here: we will never forget them. Never.

Thank you.