

Memorial Day Ceremony, Amercian Cemetry Margraten, May 26 2024

Excellencies,

Generals

Veterans and Families

Ladies and Gentlemen

In eleven days, on June sixth,  
it will be **exactly eighty years** ago  
that the liberation of Western Europe began,  
on the day that we call **D-Day**.

Here too, in this place,  
this cemetery,  
we remember liberators,  
who **survived** the invasion in Normandy  
**only to lose their lives later** in the war.

One of them was **Staff Sergeant Jimmie Dirago**,  
from Colbert County, Alabama,  
a gunner who  
fought in the air  
to help the liberators reach land.

Although he was born seven thousand kilometers away,

Jimmie had **a lot in common with Chris Roemer in Rotterdam.**

It **was more than**

their being in their early twenties and on the brink of adult life.

**What they *also* had in common**

was that they were **both** active in **the Scouts** and had taken a pledge **to help other people at all times.**

**What they *also* had in common**

was that they took their pledge **very seriously.**

**Jimmie,**

an only child,

**did not have** to serve in the military, but he **begged** to join anyway.

To help other people,

people **he did not even know,** on the other side of the world.

And **Chris**,  
here in the Netherlands,  
who was no longer allowed to be a Scout,  
because the occupiers **banned the movement**.

But **he too remained true** to his pledge  
by joining the resistance,  
and helping people,  
wanted by the occupiers,  
go into hiding.

**What they *also* had in common**  
was that in October of **nineteen forty-four**,  
both of them fell **into enemy hands**.

**Jimmie** was in his airplane over Germany  
when it was hit by anti-aircraft fire.  
He parachuted **out of** the plane  
and once he landed,  
he was arrested,  
interrogated,  
and then disappeared forever...

**Chris** fell into enemy hands  
when the occupiers  
during a raid  
found illegal documents on him...

He found out **how brutal interrogation** could be,  
but his lips **remained sealed**  
and he was sentenced to death.

Only,

**Chris** had the luck, **Jimmie** didn't have.  
Because, as he was about to be executed  
he was freed by his friends in the resistance.

Chris **too** then disappeared,  
to go into hiding  
until the end of the war  
six months later...

..when **he** was able to pick up his life again  
and become

- a **husband** to my mother,
- a **father** to my brothers, my sister and to me, and

- a **grandfather** to our children...

But **Jimmie**?

Jimmie never came home and was never found.

His parents lost their **only** son,

and **all that is left** is a name

here on the Walls of the Missing

and on a monument in Alabama

that his Scout Group dedicated

to him,

***'who sealed his Scout Pledge with his life'.***

It reminds me of **another** monument,

a liberation monument

in Kerkrade,

not far from here,

which bears the words

***'Let us remain worthy of freedom'.***

I see that **as a duty**,

not only for myself,

because of my personal history,

but **for everyone**.

To understand, you only  
need to look around you here:

**more than eight thousand three hundred** graves...

and on the Walls on which we see Jimmy's name

**another seventeen hundred** other names...

**More than ten thousand young people**

who gave their lives

so that others - like my father - **could rebuild** theirs.

And in eleven days,

when we mark the eightieth anniversary of D-Day,

and we see images of all the cemeteries there in

Normandy,

we'll see **a multitude of ten thousand reasons**

**to remain** worthy of that freedom.

I know

that's **not easy**

in a world that feels off-balance.

It's not easy,

but **necessary**.

Because all those young people gave their lives  
**not** for a freedom  
in which people can  
'exclude, suppress or fight one another'.

No, they made the ultimate sacrifice  
for a freedom which,  
**in the spirit** of Jimmie and Chris,  
should **revolve** around  
**helping each other and the world.**

**That** is the freedom  
that we must remain - or become - worthy of.  
So that **we honor**  
Jimmie Dirago and all the others  
who, almost eighty years ago,  
had **the courage**  
**to take the first steps** towards **our liberation.**