

Commemoration at Old Hickory Monument at 'Gouvernement aan de Maas', Sept. 14, 2024

Veterans,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It took the runners of Atletiek Maastricht five days.

Five days covering the eight hundred and fifty kilometers from Omaha Beach to here,

Following the path of the Old Hickory Division
eighty years ago.

The same route,
but surely not the same pace.

More than 3 months it took, back then
to reach this riverbank here,
ready for the crossing.

More than three months.
As this was not the first –
nor the last –
river that they
had to fight their way across.

The first was the **Vire**,
still close to Omaha Beach,
which they could not – like here the Meuse –
cross within a day

It took them weeks
to reach the other side,
so important to force a breakthrough in Normandy.

Then it was the **Seine**,
which, less than two months ago,
at the opening of the Olympic Games
served as a beautiful background
for the brotherhood of all nations,
But **then** had to be fought over
to relieve Paris from the Nazi regime.

While crossing rivers,
it was by **no** means a matter
of simply running through France and Belgium
for these men,
but of fighting, getting wounded and perishing

Until today, eighty years ago,
they crossed the **Meuse** here
to liberate Maastricht,
as the first city in the Netherlands.

But our liberators,
the men of the Old Hickory,
still had a rough road ahead of them..

A **very** rough road,
because before they could
cross the **Roer**, the **Rhine**
and ultimately the **Elbe** for victory,
they had to fight to the death...

In the Battle of Aachen,
in the Battle of the Bulge in the Ardennes, and
in the Battle of Hürtgen Forest.

I do not need not tell you
how deadly these battles were.
Everyone can see for themselves

at those two enormous war cemeteries,
near here in Margraten
and just across the border in Henri-Chapelle.

Ladies and gentlemen,

How well known the story of
Old Hickory's almost three-hundred-day battle
– from Omaha Beach to the Elbe –
may be,
it remains so very important
in our day and age and those of our children
to repeat that story again and again.

Especially in these times
when we **have gotten used** to freedom
so much, that we can hardly imagine how
'scary, unfree and unfair'
a life without democracy can be.

We have gotten used

to mindlessly driving, cycling or walking
over undestroyed river bridges
and we truly do not know
what it feels like
to step into a boat here,
that might not reach the other shore

Let's please keep wondering
Whether we, ourselves
would have the courage
to be like them.
to risk - and **give** -
our life, health and wellbeing
for some else's freedom...

What **is** certain is that

we have a duty
to remain worthy
of the freedom
that they gave us while paying the ultimate price,

To remain worthy of freedom,

if only out of gratitude,
and respect to you, our guests from the United States
who are still with us today,
and made it possible for us
to celebrate 80 years of freedom today.

Thank you, thank you, thank you