

**Memorial Day, American Cemetery Margraten, May 24, 2026**

If you grow up here,  
you grow up with the stories.

Stories  
about how this cemetery began;  
about those who remained here forever;  
and about the loved ones they left behind.

Stories passed on  
from generation to generation.

That is why, even today, we still know

- how the trucks kept coming here,
- how they were filled to the top with bodies,
- how cold and wet it was,
- how the ground was drenched with rain, or frozen solid,
- who dug the graves,
- how the endless hacking sounded,
- the smell,
- how local men and boys
- helped to finish this horrible job.

Or, as one of them said later:

“What I saw there,  
you could write books about that.

Or actually,  
better not write about it at all:  
it was simply too awful.”

Just as horrible  
was the realization  
that there were so many.

So many young people  
who lost their lives

for our freedom.

The stories also taught us  
who they were.

Some of them  
were well known to us already:  
young men in their twenties,  
sometimes even younger,  
who, after the liberation,  
stayed here for a while.

They lived with local families,  

- ate with them,
- spent countless evenings playing games,
- shared joys and sorrows,

but never came back to us alive..

We got to know the others later,  
when we – out of gratitude and respect -  
adopted all the graves  
and all the names on the Walls of the Missing.

Through these adoptions,  
stories arrived - from overseas.

From families, sweethearts, and friends who were  
thankful that we cared for their dear ones.  
They began to tell us about the person  
behind the name, the rank, the unit  
carved into their stone.

Where he or she came from,  
what they dreamed of,  
who they loved...

Stories also – of course - of loss and grief:

- the woman who was the only mother in her village never to see her son return...
- the very young widow, just married before he left...
- the child who had to grow up without a father...

Over the years, these stories and friendships  
grew stronger, grew deeper  
and today, when we look  
across this sea of graves,  
we see, behind each stone,  
a person arise  
with a face  
that never grew older,  
in exchange for our freedom and our democracy.

A sacrifice  
for which we will always be grateful,  
but which also demands from us  
to stay worthy of that hard-fought freedom.

Last year, I called this place  
a *Memorial for Humanity.*

Because it stands for  
people who stood up for others,  
for people they did not even know,  
but to whom they gave back  
freedom to be themselves.

This year,  
I would also like to call it  
a ***Memorial of Encouragement.***

Because if we truly want  
to remain worthy of our freedom,  
then we too **must** have the courage  
to stand up for others  
and against injustice.

Especially now, in this uncertain world,  
even in our own country,  
hatred, intimidation, and discrimination  
are chipping away the foundations of our democracy.

We know, and we see here,  
where indifference and looking the other way  
can lead:  
to endless suffering  
and the loss of human life.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Today, let us **remember**  
all these young men—and four women—  
we have been holding so close to our hearts,  
from generation to generation.

But let us also **ask** ourselves:  
what can **I** do  
to be vigilant.  
And prevent things from spiraling out of control like that  
ever again?

There is no greater tribute  
we can give them.