

Excellency's,
Generals,
Veterans and Families,
Ladies and Gentlemen

Today - on this beautiful Sunday - I would like to take you back in time exactly 80 years. May 1943 was an eventful month in our country, for a number of reasons. In battle and in resistance.

Let me start with the latter. A story about the **Dutch** resistance.

In May 1943, our country witnessed the largest strike in all of Europe against the Nazi regime. About 500,000 people laid down their work. Throughout all kinds of sectors, including, for example, the coal mines of South Limburg. The reason was the announcement of the 'Arbeitseinsatz'.

Hitler had lost countless German lives at the battle of Stalingrad and therefore needed fresh recruits. Hundreds of thousands of former soldiers from the Netherlands, who had previously fought against the Nazis, had to report to work as prisoners of war - in the German war machine.

The strike was brutally crushed by the Nazis. Hundreds of strikers were sent to camps or got injured. Eighty strikers were killed by summary execution, seven of them in Limburg. The bodies of some of them were never recovered, since keeping them hidden and denying bereaved families their mourning, was part of the terror.

Yes, it broke the resistance, at least for that moment, but it also ignited anger; furious anger at the occupier's utter disregard for the value of human life.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Diving into the past also means digging a bit deeper into what passed on to **me** from the war. I think of my **father**, who was active in both battle and resistance. I think of my **mother**, who - as a war child - grew up in Rotterdam, a city bombed to the ground, where she faced extreme hunger. In 1942, she was allowed to come here, to Margraten, to recover for a few weeks. And I think of my sister Thecla and my **three big brothers** Jos, Paul and Peter, who all taught me so much, and with whom I cherish a warm, brotherly bond. Every day I feel privileged for having a sister and three brothers.

No less than **40 brothers** are buried here at this impressive cemetery. Young men whose parents received terrible news on more than one occasion. A chilling thought that renders me quiet.

In Conway, South Carolina, the father and mother of twin brothers Edward R. Norton and James A. Norton Jr. had to be informed by the army command of the death of both their sons. Their sons died on their very first mission as bomber pilots of a Martin B-26 Mautrauder.

From a young age, the Norton brothers were fascinated with flying and airplanes. They built model planes, and father Norton bought them a used aircraft and a small piece of land to use as a runway. By the time they finished high school at 18, they had both logged about 50 flying hours. They came to Europe after training as 2nd Lieutenants, where they were assigned to the 322 Bombardment Group.

German anti-aircraft fire ended their dream of a life as aviators on May 17th 1943, right off the coast of England. They found death in the cold waters of the North Sea and died as they had lived: inseparable.

James is buried here at Margraten in Plot P, Row 16, Grave 4. His brother Edward's body was never found, but his memory has been given a place in the Walls of the Missing.

These brothers and countless others gave their young lives for our freedom, peace and democracy. For that, we are eternally grateful to them and we should never stop telling stories like theirs.

And **just like** Edward and James Norton, **just like** the Dutch strikers and just like **my dear father**, today's heroes - not far from here, in Ukraine - are standing up for their freedom and right to self-determination.

I wish for us all to never forget the lessons of the past. The past, so visible here on this memorable Sunday at the American War Cemetery in Margraten.

Thank you for your attention.