

Netherland-America Foundation Awards Dinner
Washington Golf and Country Club
Arlington, VA
Remarks by General David H. Petraeus
16 April 2010

Well, thank you very much. Goedenavond. Dank je wel for that warm welcome and thanks, Bill [Tucker], for your very kind introduction and for your leadership of the Netherland-America Foundation.

Ambassador [Renee'] Jones-Bos, it's great to see you here this evening and to have you with us to represent the Queen and help celebrate the bonds of friendship between the Netherlands and the United States. Thanks for the terrific job that you do to help maintain the wonderful relationship between our two countries. And thanks, as well, to the four former U.S. Ambassadors to the Netherlands who are here with us this evening. And it's great to have Ambassador Fay Hartog Levin, U.S. Ambassador to the Netherlands here – a woman sent from central casting to be our Ambassador to the Netherlands, and a woman who has already earned a tremendous reputation in the Hague. It's wonderful to see you all.

I also want to recognize tonight's award winners, Mark, Herman, and Henri. Congratulations on the honors that you'll receive this evening and let me add a personal thank you to each of you for all that you have done to strengthen the extraordinary relationship between the Netherlands and the United States.

Well, it's a true honor to join you all this evening, to participate in tonight's dinner, and to have the opportunity to talk about the wonderful Dutch-American relationship -- one that those here know to be a very special one, indeed.

In fact, I'm recently back from a quick trip to "the Old Country." And, like all here, I'm sure, I use the term "Old Country" with great affection – in the same way that my Dutch immigrant father used that term. In any event, while I was back in Holland, I heard some of the usual jokes about Dutchmen – from Dutchmen, I might add, showing that Nederlanders do, indeed, have a sense of humor! As always, the jokes featured qualities like the legendary stubbornness, penchant for independent thinking, thriftiness, aversion to ostentation, forthrightness verging on bluntness, occasional thick headedness, and other qualities that have given rise to humor about those of us of Dutch descent over the years...

But, again, it's great to be with you this evening to celebrate the wonderful relationship between the Netherlands and the United States. In fact, what I'd like to do tonight is highlight the enduring nature and critical importance of that relationship. Indeed, our two countries enjoy a truly strategic partnership that blossomed at the birth of the United States, was reinforced during World War II, and has continued ever since. We've stood together when each of us faced an existential threat to our existence, and ensured each other's freedom. This relationship has flourished for centuries, and I have no doubt it will continue to do so in the future.

PROUD SON OF "OLD EUROPE"

The relationship between our two countries is one that I take very personally, because, again, my father Sixtus grew up in the Netherlands, in Friesland, to be exact. Friesland boppe! And he attended navigation school and sailed out of Rotterdam as a young Dutch Merchant Marine Officer. Indeed, the values he held and passed on to me were formed some 7 decades ago – in the Netherlands, the country that my father loved so much.

As a young Merchant Mariner in the spring of 1940, my dad was at sea when the Nazis occupied Holland at the outset of the Second World War. Unable to return to Rotterdam, his ship instead sailed into New York Harbor. There, after realizing that they could not return home, he and most of his shipmates volunteered to sign on with the US Merchant Marines.

In a testament to his abilities as a seaman, the values he forged growing up in the Netherlands, and the sheer fact that he survived numerous convoys with the US service that had the highest per capita losses in WWII, my father became the captain of a Liberty ship at the age of 29, subsequently surviving a convoy to Murmansk during which some half of the American ships were lost. At the end of the war, after 5 long years at sea, he settled in New York – or as some like to say “New Amsterdam” – with my mother, whom he’d met in New York during the war.

No matter how long he stayed in America, though, my father’s memories of growing up in Holland never left him. And no matter the subject, each memory somehow always ended up having to do with canals and, often, with pole vaulting across them – though apparently he landed in the canals as often as he successfully vaulted over them!

While listening to those stories as a young boy, I often envisioned visiting Holland and trying to vault over canals myself, just like my Dad did. Unfortunately, the opportunity only presented itself in recent years – a few decades too late, my wife informs me, observing that I am well beyond pole vaulting age. And while each time I visit the Netherlands, the Dutch stubbornness I inherited from my father makes me want to see if I still have what it takes, the sensibility I learned from my mother – and continue to learn from my wife – has kept my feet planted on the ground – so far, at least!

So I speak to you this evening as a proud son of a stubborn sea captain from “Old Europe,” as an American who grew up on the Hudson River in a town established in a location that Henry Hudson assessed was a “very pleasant place to build a town on,” and as the former commander of the US Army airborne units that, some 50 years before I joined them, gave to the Dutch people of Eindhoven and Nijmegen the greatest gift of all, their freedom.

HISTORICAL ALLIANCE

Well, as you all know, the Dutch-American friendship goes back many centuries and just last year, of course, we celebrated the anniversary of Henry Hudson’s arrival in New York and 400 years of common history.

Some of the early Pilgrims who set sail for what would become the United States in fact spent 12 years living in Amsterdam, Leiden, and Rotterdam before boarding the Mayflower. And in the years afterwards, they would be followed by many Dutch settlers as well.

There were some wild times back in the Colonial days... In fact, a recent publication from the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs tells the tale: “Life in New Amsterdam was often riotous and disorderly... Drunken brawls were commonplace, and almost everyone around joined in the fray... Wouter van Twiller, the third governor of the colony, was known for his attachment to the gin bottle, which did not enhance his decision-making and executive capacities.” And “on one occasion, the residents were treated to the spectacle of their inebriated spiritual leader being chased down the street by their equally inebriated governor, sword in hand. Needless to say...both were eventually recalled.”

Of course, the first Dutch colonists also brought many good things to America – including Sinterklaas... or as well call him – Santa Claus! And indeed American children – and American retailers – are eternally grateful.

Furthermore, it was a Dutchman on the island of St. Eustatius in the Caribbean – Governor de Graeff – who, after reading the Declaration of Independence, rendered the first recorded salute to the flag of the United States on November 16, 1776. And the Nederlanders of St. Eustatius would go on to become one of the new United States' leading suppliers, accounting for an estimated one-half of the war material for George Washington's armies. Given how close to defeat Washington was at times, it is no exaggeration to say this logistics line helped save the United States when we were at our most vulnerable.

In the 1780s, John Adams announced that an alliance between our two nations was “clearly ordained by providence.” And, when he persuaded the Netherlands to recognize American independence, he said it was, “the happiest event and the greatest action of (his) life, past or future.”

In the 19th century, the US and the Netherlands enjoyed close economic ties, to the benefit of both our nations. A good part of New York was developed with the help of Dutch investment. And the huge Louisiana Purchase in 1803 was made possible by loans from firms in Amsterdam. In the 1840s, Dutch immigrants established farms in many of the frontier towns in places like Michigan, Iowa, and Wisconsin. And, of course, the Netherlands helped finance and establish the transcontinental railroad, completed in 1869.

Three of our American Presidents are of Dutch descent – Martin Van Buren, Theodore Roosevelt, and Franklin Roosevelt. Indeed it was FDR who, in 1935 noted that, “Our early forbears brought from the Netherlands a quality of endurance against great odds – a quality of quiet determination to conquer obstacles of nature and obstacles of man....The influence of New Netherland on the whole Colonial period of our history... was an influence which made itself felt in all of the other twelve Colonies, and it is an influence which manifests itself today in almost every part of our Union of States.”

WORLD WAR II

In World War II, of course, American troopers fought and died to liberate the Dutch people. And indeed, the landings of the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions, which began the liberation of the Netherlands in September 1944, are still celebrated today. In the largest Airborne operation the world has ever seen, troopers boldly jumped out of some 1,500 airplanes and into Dutch fields...selflessly and tirelessly enduring tough, relentless fighting as they worked to seize bridges spanning nearby canals and rivers. Before Eindhoven was liberated, the paratroopers of the 101st suffered over 2,100 casualties in what proved to be a much tougher fight than almost anyone had anticipated. But in the face of a tough enemy and tough losses, the Screaming Eagles pressed on, together with their fellow paratroopers from the 82d Airborne, the British 1st Airborne Division, and the Polish 1st Independent Parachute Brigade, as well as the armored elements that linked up with them and the air elements that supported them. And together of course, they ultimately returned to the people of the Netherlands the freedom that had been taken from them in 1940.

Last September, I was honored to participate, along with U.S. Ambassador Fay Hartog Levin, in a number of events and ceremonies that commemorated the 65th anniversary of that campaign to liberate the Netherlands, so-called Operation Market-Garden. As the 40th Commander of the 101st Airborne and a one-time acting Commander of the 82nd, it was a tremendous honor to be there for the ceremonies.

While I was there, I also visited the US cemetery at Margraten, also known as the Netherlands American Cemetery. As I looked across the cemetery at the dozens of rows of solitary white crosses and stars of David, I thought about what they represented – the thousands of men who each gave what Abraham Lincoln termed “the last full measure of devotion” to help liberate the Dutch – and, truly, all of us – from tyranny and evil. I remembered learning years earlier, on a previous visit, that local Dutch citizens had adopted each and every one of the more than 8000 graves and personally looked after them. That practice continues to this day, and it is a tribute for which Americans in uniform, in particular, remain most grateful.

Here in the United States, those who rest at Arlington National Cemetery do so in the shadow of a 50-bell carillon and tower – a gift from the people of the Netherlands and a symbol of the harmonious and enduring friendship between our two nations. And every day, that wonderful carillon plays the anthems of America’s armed forces.

In April 1952, before the carillon was completed, Queen Juliana visited the United States and presented a small silver bell to President Truman as a token of the monument to come. During the ceremony, the Queen spoke of the small bells of the carillon: “To achieve real harmony, justice should be done also to the small and tiny voices, which are not supported by the might of their weight” she said. “So many voices in our troubled world are still unheard. Let that be an incentive for all of us when we hear the bells ringing.”

POST-WW II ALLIANCE AND THE FIGHT AGAINST EXTREMISM

As the bells have rung throughout the years, the partnership forged during World War II has grown and has helped ensure that the small and tiny voices in our troubled world might have a chance to be heard.

Indeed, Dutch and American troopers have served alongside each other since then during the Cold War, and, in more recent years, in Haiti, the Balkans, Iraq, Afghanistan, and on the waters off Somalia. And having served personally with Dutch soldiers in Western Europe, Haiti, Bosnia, Iraq, and now throughout the CENTCOM area, I can affirm the strength of our relationship and the enormous respect America’s men and women in uniform hold for the Dutch comrades with whom they serve, shoulder to shoulder, in important missions in tough places.

Now, I try to take every opportunity I can to spread the word about the remarkable work being done by the over 210,000 wonderful American men and women serving throughout the Central Command area of responsibility. Day after day, on the ground, in the air, and at sea, these courageous and committed troopers perform difficult missions against tough enemies under the most challenging conditions. But tonight it is also important to highlight as well the tremendous sacrifices of our Dutch allies in the fight against extremism.

Every day, Dutch sailors conduct counterpiracy operations to keep the sea lanes safe for international commerce.

Dutch airmen take to the air to support and protect those on the ground in Afghanistan. And Dutch soldiers perform missions in Uruzgan Province and train and mentor their partners in a challenging counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan, and help mentor Iraqi Security Force leaders as part of the NATO Training Mission in Iraq.

Dutch soldiers are, in fact, among those with whom US troopers serving in the Central Command area most want to soldier when the going gets tough. And that includes the tough fighting we’ve undertaken

together in Afghanistan, where 190 Dutch troopers have been wounded and another 21 Nederlanders, including the son of the Netherlands' senior military officer, have made the ultimate sacrifice. As is the case with our fallen comrades and their families, we all owe them and their families an eternal debt of gratitude.

CONCLUSION

We face numerous challenges at home and abroad as we embark on a new decade. And – whether in the Netherlands or in the United States, in Afghanistan or Iraq, in the national security field or in business and non-profit sectors – it is vital that we celebrate and nourish long term strategic partnerships like the one that exists between the Netherlands and the United States. Events like this one, of course, provide an opportunity to reflect on that partnership, to recognize the common causes we have united to confront, to remember the difficult struggles we have jointly endured, and to join together in celebration of our unique relationship. And so, tonight, after I sit down, perhaps we can each join in a toast to the people of the Netherlands – our longtime partners – and to the friendship between our two Nations.

With that, may God bless each and every one of you, our troopers and those of our Allies serving around the world, and the extraordinary partnership between the Netherlands and our United States.

Thank you very much.