Thank you, Mieke/Frans.

I am honored to be here today.

First let me thank and pay my respects to those who have made this day possible:

The Fields of Margraten team:
Mieke Kirkels
Frans Roebroeks
Jo Purnot
Eugenie Jansen and
Albert Elings

The team of the Maastricht library and Centre Ceramique:
Frederique Stille and Valerie Ruijpers

And finally, other honored veterans who are here today.

The history of the liberation of the Netherlands now includes the names of these people who have done so much to make the events of this week possible.

"The tumult and the shouting dies;
The Captains and the Kings depart:
Still stands Thine ancient sacrifice,
An humble and a contrite heart.
Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet,
Lest we forget lest we forget!"

It has been said, and correctly so, that "the old is a part of the new".

It seems to me that Kipling may have had this in mind when he wrote the lines I've just recited.

We come here today to celebrate what some may call "the old and the new".
The guns of World War II have fallen silent. The conqueror and the conquered have all departed.

But we here today remember the sacrifice and, in our hearts, we say to each other, "We will never forget."

Our hearts are contrite and we are determined to remember what took place here sixty-five years ago.

More than sixty-five years ago, two hundred sixty of our brothers in arms came to the small town of Margraten – a small town that none of us had ever heard of.

In many ways, it was a town not unlike the towns and farming villages we had left at home.

We'd been told that we were going to be working to establish a cemetery – the final resting place for so many who had made the ultimate sacrifice.

Like the people of Margraten, little did we know that we were engaging in a life altering endeavor that, sixty-five years later would bring us back to this place at this time – to honor, to mourn and to pay our final respects to those we buried here.

Sixty-five years ago, I was a nineteen year old farm boy who had never been more than three miles from the cotton fields of my home in Alabama.

I had never seen more than one death in my life – that was the death of my sister, who died at age eleven.

I remember very vividly that she was dressed in her Sunday best.

The people who came to mourn her death were friends and neighbors. They all agreed that her passing was tragic because at age eleven that was much, much too soon.

The brave soldiers that we laid to rest here at Margraten were a little older than eleven, but we can all agree that their passing was also much too soon.

I recall that Friday morning long ago when we disembarked from the Army vehicles, looked out across the plains of Margraten and saw the vehicles loaded with the dead.

It shook me that these dead had no friends or relatives here to mourn their passing. There were no relatives, no friends who would stand at the graveside and say a final "goodbye".

There were only two hundred sixty African American soldiers whose sole task it was to bring some dignity and some respect and to say, inaudibly, "goodbye".

We had been commanded to give respect to those we could not even associate with in life.

But on that first day, we realized that whatever life experiences we'd had as African Americans, this was our obligation – to set aside our prejudices, our colors, and our fears and give to these young Americans the honor, the respect and the dignity that they so well deserved.

Prior to coming to Margraten, we realized that we were a service company and that our duties entailed delivering supplies, clearing roads and, in some cases, building structures.

We were a jovial bunch – always willing and always ready to laugh, to criticize and to sometimes relate a story that was not always true.

We were just trying to do our duty as our commanders defined that duty.

But Margraten was different. From the moment we disembarked from the trucks, we somehow realized that we were engaging in a life and death duty.

We were alive but before us were hundreds of deaths.

Our commanders, one of whom is here today, took me - as his First Sergeant - on a tour of the plains of Margraten.

On that cold winter day, when we looked out on the plain that is now Margraten Cemetery, the land was flat and the wind kicked up vestiges of unmelted snow.

It was eerily quiet.

The few sounds that we heard came from the numerous vehicles that were unloading the dead and then departing for what we learned would be a trip to bring back more dead.

It was our job to organize these two hundred sixty grave diggers into units or teams to make our work effective and efficient.

But how do you begin to organize what would turn out to be the final resting place for more than twenty thousand dead?

The Graves Registration people had done the surveying and it was necessary for us to look to them for guidance and direction.

The Graves Registration company had to be as exact as possible in their surveying and planning. They had an idea of the number of people who would finally be buried at Margraten.

The landscape, at first glance, seemed flat and barren. In this winter setting, it looked as if it was land lying fallow, just waiting for the Spring thaw so that it could be turned into what farmers grow in this part of the world.

It looked as if it might be fertile and just waiting to be developed as it had, no doubt, been developed for many years in the past.

But, again, this was different.

Because of the violence of the war, planted in these grounds would be human beings - human beings whose most recent thoughts in life had been preserving their own freedom and the freedom of those who were directly in the path of war and the freedom of those in generations to come.

The Captain said to me, “You will not need your side arms nor the other weapons, what you will need are gloves and shovels.”

The Graves Registration people told us that the dimensions of each grave had to be exact - six feet long, six feet deep and three feet in width.

The Captain said, “First Sergeant, get your men and let’s begin the work at hand.”

It was then that I realized that this was the most serious and memorable thing any of us had ever done.

This cemetery was quiet and it seemed to me at that time that everyone spoke in whispers. I don’t think they did, but it seemed that way.

The weather was cold and it seemed that the rain would never stop.

The ground was hard and when we pulled the tarpaulins back, we saw the faces of young Americans who - as Abraham Lincoln said - had made “the ultimate sacrifice”.

They had given their lives for a cause bigger than themselves, a cause bigger than all of us.

In November of 1944, it was very difficult for this nineteen year old First Sergeant to comprehend all of the things that were going on around him and around the rest of the Allied forces - forces who were struggling to successfully complete their mission and bring the war to an end.

Because of the number of dead arriving on a daily basis, we were encouraged to focus all of our attention on the two hundred or more bodies that we buried each day.

But it was still hard for me to get out of my mind the one burial that I had seen before coming to Margraten.

It seemed to me that everyone in the little country church where my sister was eulogized and buried was in tears.

But who was there to weep and to mourn each of the soldiers we laid to rest?

It seemed as if the trucks bringing in the dead were always one step ahead of our ability to dig their graves and to give them the proper burial that they so much deserved.

After several days, someone said, "Don't worry, you'll get used to it."

What a cavalier attitude that was!

We never got used to it. And sixty-five years later, it still boggles our minds.

We were black Americans, detailed to bury white Americans.

But in our lifetime, we couldn't eat in the same mess hall or go to the same social clubs. And yet, we could bury them.

In life, we couldn't associate with them.

The ultimate irony was that in their most sacred moment –the moment of death - we were given the most sacred task.

It was difficult to sleep at night. Our day at the grave yard began as soon as it was light and didn't end until dark.

Our quarters were just over the border in Belgium. It was a twenty or twenty-five minute ride to get to the cemetery.

While there was a lot of chatter going on during the ride to the cemetery, the closer we got, the more the chatter ceased. By the time we arrived, there was no talking at all.

We just got our gloves, our picks and our shovels and we went about the grim task of doing exactly the same thing that we had done the day before.

We were encouraged to take a ten to fifteen minute break at mid-morning.

But, because of the nature of the job, many felt it was in our best interest, psychologically, to forego the break and keep digging.

The task of the Graves Registration company was to properly identify each soldier before he was laid to rest. The Graves Registration company was always on hand to give us information on who had been identified and who had not been identified.

It was comforting for us diggers to realize that those who were buried had been checked, rechecked and identified beyond doubt.

There were very few who could not be positively identified on the spot. For those, the Graves Registration people used every tool at their command to make a positive identification before we were allowed to bury them in graves marked "unknown".

The task of digging the graves was difficult. I suppose that even under ideal circumstances, the digging of graves is difficult enough. But under these circumstances, it sometimes bordered on the impossible.

The weather was cold, very cold. The ground was hard.

In some cases, the ground tended to shift and the grave would cave in before we could properly bury the body.

I can recall that on too many occasions our hands were swollen and blistered and it was necessary for the medics to treat the diggers as best they could.

In spite of this, the number of soldiers who complained about sore hands and about sore backs was at an absolute minimum. We felt that if these fallen men had given their all, we could do no less than give our all.

Over the years, I have often been asked how many bodies were put in a grave.
One body was placed in one grave. The same soldiers who dug a grave were charged with the responsibility of placing that body in the grave and covering it. There were no mass burials, no cavalier attitudes toward the dead.

It was a grim but necessary task.

Each morning, when we arrived at the cemetery, there were six, sometimes eight, young females who stood at a distance and waved at us. It seemed as if they were afraid to get too close.

Looking back, we later realized that this was probably the first time in their lives that they had seen a black person. They were cautious and, in some cases, they seemed afraid.

But as the days turned into weeks, instead of waving from a distance, they abandoned caution and began to speak with us.

I remember vividly one young girl who was ten, maybe twelve years old. She spoke perfect English. She asked me if I was the boss. Did I live in New York?
What was my schooling like? I suppose this, more than anything else, convinced me that people are pretty much the same, no matter what the geography.

I hope that this young girl has turned into a very productive mother or grandmother. If she is privy to these ceremonies, I hope she will come forward and reminisce with me about the old and the new.

This was the only contact we had with the population of Margraten. We later learned that the people of Margraten were instrumental in helping to dig graves and lay the soldiers to rest. But that happened after we left this area.

That was sixty-five years ago.

Much has changed since then. But I think I would be remiss if I didn't say a few words that all of you, I'm certain, already know.

War does not only affect the combatants. It affects the children of combatants.
It affects the mothers and fathers, the grandmothers and the grandfathers.

Recently I have heard from a number of people who were affected by events at Margraten – people whose family members were buried there.

They came from a cross-section of the United States – from Mount Morris, PA to Hopkinsville, Kentucky to North Adams, Massachusetts to Newkirk, Oklahoma.

Each had a different story – some spoke of a brother, others of a husband, father or friend. Some of their loved ones had been brought home after their initial burial at Margraten. Others remain here.

Each circumstance was unique, but their communication with me had a common theme – all expressed a feeling of long-sought closure after finally communicating with someone whose hands had actually buried soldiers at Margraten – someone who had been there to say, "Goodbye".

War affects all of us and it occurs to me that we all have a role to play in a conflict of the magnitude of World War II.

The people of the Netherlands - especially those in Margraten and Maastricht - know this all too well.

When the dead were buried, we, as soldiers, went on to other duties and we finally went home.

But the twenty thousand who were buried in the Netherlands remained.

Who was it that took on the responsibility of managing such a huge cemetery?
Who took on the task of remembering those who had given their lives to a cause that was intended to give us all our freedom?

The people of the Netherlands took on that task.

So I believe we owe a debt of gratitude, especially to the people of the Margraten area who, each year place flowers on these graves. In doing so, they say, in effect, "Thank you. We remember you and we honor you."

And I say, to these gallant people who care for these graves, "Thank you. We respect you and we honor you."

The fields of Margraten should not be just a place where we laid so many to rest. It should be a lesson in human relations.

It should tell us that, in many ways, we are all related to each other. We all depend upon each other in some way.

Perhaps, just perhaps, if we had kept this simple idea in mind long ago, the guns of World War II would never had exploded into such death and destruction or, at the least, the guns would have been silenced in less than the six years that it took.

But we didn't apply this simple theory. So, here we are, sixty-five years later – trying to make sense of all that has happened, trying to come to grips with finding the means to keep it from happening again.

The work of the Fields of Margraten Foundation team has ensured that these lessons of the past are memorialized for all who follow.

Their work has created an enduring bridge for connecting future generations with the lessons of the past. I know that there is a special place in the chancellery of heaven for this tireless team, and well there should be.

Of all the words and phrases we've used here, the poet said it best when she spoke of "bridge building". Now, if you will, please listen to her words.

An old man, going a lone highway,
came, at evening, cold and gray,
to a chasm vast and wide and steep,
with waters rolling cold and deep.
The old man paused in the twilight dim.
The sullen waters had no fears for him.
But he paused, when safe on the other side,
and built a bridge to span the tide.

"Old man," said a fellow pilgrim near,
"You're wasting your time with building here;
your journey will end with the ending day;
and you never again shall pass this way.
You've crossed the chasm vast and wide.
Why build ye this bridge at eventide?"

The builder lifted his old gray head.
"Good friend, the way I've come," he said,
"there followeth after me today,
a youth, whose feet must pass this way.
The chasm that was as naught to me
to that fair-haired youth may a pitfall be.
He, too, must cross in the twilight dim.
Good friend, I am building this bridge for him."

Will Allen Dromgoogle

I invite the good and dedicated people of Margraten and Maastricht – in fact, people everywhere – to heed the call of this poet of yesterday and the poets of today - to continue to build bridges that span the chasms of hate, prejudice and misunderstanding.

It is my hope that, in so doing, we will not continue to repeat the mistakes of the past.

Sixty-five years from now we should be able to look back on these events and know that it is, indeed, possible to live in a world free of violence.

The moving hand writes and having writ moves on.