



Stichting

Adoptie Graven Amerikaanse Begraafplaats Margraten
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Tribute to the American Orphans of the Margraten Boys

FINAL PROJECT REPORT

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The Netherland-America Foundation, Inc.



Dutch Embassy Washington

Medtronic

provincie limburg



Project "Tribute to the American Orphans of the Margraten Boys"
Foundation for Adopting Graves American Cemetery Margraten
Mergelland Mens Choir
25 – 30 september 2018



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MERGELLAND **Mannenkoor**



Board members Foundation for Adopting Graves American Cemetery Margraten with Nancy en Noel Lewis-Shomon (daughter and grandson of Capt Shomon, founder of the American Cemetery in Margraten in 1944)



Margraten Men's Choir in front of the Iwo Jima Monument

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The project

In September 2018 the American WW2 Orphans Network (AWON; www.awon.org) will close doors. AWON has a close relationship with Margraten. Many of their fathers are buried at the American cemetery. The Foundation for Adopting Graves at the American Cemetery in Margraten hosted a large group of AWON in 2005, 2010 and in 2015 and established connections with all the adopters of their fathers' graves.

In the weekend of 28 – 30 September 2018 a last AWON Gala Gathering was held in Washington for which the Foundation had been invited. Because of the special relationship between the community of Margraten and the sons and daughters of our “Margraten Boys” the mens choir “Mergelland Mannenkoor (MMK)” from Margraten travelled along and performed during the gala in the Crystal Gateway Marriott hotel in Washington and during a wreath laying ceremony near Arlington National Cemetery. The members of the MMK are all inhabitants of Margraten and a number of their parents and grandparents gave their fertile land to the Americans for the installation of a cemetery.

We travelled to Washington DC from Tuesday 25 till Sunday 30 September 2018 with a delegation of 40 persons. During our stay in Washington we held presentations about the adoption program and the history of the American cemetery in Margraten. With a performance of the “Margraten Mannenkoor” we promoted the Netherlands, the province of Limburg and specifically the community of Margraten.

About the tribute

The song “Do you remember” written by Math Depuits and composed by Hub Vanhautem and also the song “Mergraote” played by the Schintaler are products of the intense feelings of gratitude of the inhabitants of Margraten. They witnessed the 18.000 American victims that were buried and reburied in their soil between November 1944 and the end of 1948. All 8301 graves and all 1722 names chiselled in the Walls of the Missing are adopted and there is a waitinglist of 400 people. Since 2017 adopting American war graves is placed on the Dutch list of UNESCO intangible cultural heritage.

The Margraten Boys were killed in action during the many bombing missions over Germany, during operation Market Garden, the Battle of the Bulge, the battle in Hürtgenwald and during the allied operations in Germany. They did not get the chance to realize their dreams, to start a family and to live in a world for which they contributed with their lives, a free and democratic society.

Many of them had a wife and young kids. These kids organised themselves in the American WWII Orphans Network (AWON). Many of them visited their fathers in Margraten. The Foundation for Adopting Graves hosted them and brought them in touch with the adopters of their fathers.

The closure of AWON is the end of an organisation, not of the close and warm relationship with the people of Margraten and with the adopters of their fathers. This tribute is a modest gesture to the American families that grew up without their fathers.

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Achievements and performances

Wednesday September 26

Visit Netherlands Embassy in Washington with a presentation of the adoption program and a performance of the choir. Our point of contact at the embassy was Ron Linker and he assisted us in the preparation of our trip. He organised that we could perform during the Market Garden Commemoration at the Arlington Cemetery in Washington and in the Baptist Church in Orange Village. Ambassador Schuwer welcomed the delegation from Margraten and was very pleased with our initiative and visit. The adoption program is a strong example of Netherland-American friendship. The choir spontaneously sang a few songs at the embassy. An impression of our visit is shown in the following link.

<https://www.facebook.com/NLintheUSA/videos/1872806989473080/>



Dutch ambassador to the USA Henne Schuwer



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Thursday September 27

Visit Asbury Methodist Village Gaithersburg.

In this village a large number of veterans (Battle of the Bulge) are living. Susan Grootenhuis, our point of contact, organised a bus which brought us from Washington to Gaithersburg. She welcomed us and introduced us to the public. After an introduction about the adoption program the choir performed a number of songs. In the middle of the program the documentary about the adoption program was showed followed by further performance of the choir. The program lasted 75 minutes and we received many emotional reactions. Susan Grootenhuis was offered a book about the American Cemetery in Margraten and the adoption program “the Margraten Boys”.



Schoolbus with the conductor Hans Geerkens



Introduction adoption program



Offering Margraten Boys to Susan Grootenhuis

The documentary on the adoption program is shown in the following link:

<https://vimeo.com/262010756>

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Friday September 28

Commemoration operation Market Garden Arlington Netherlands Carillon

On Friday morning an official commemoration was held in front of the Netherlands carillon North of Arlington National Cemetery with ambassador Schuwer and military attaché for the Netherlands captain Ammerlaan.

In the audience were 25 American veterans from various wars, military and civilian embassy personnel, press (Radio NPO 1 and television) and a large group of civilian attendees. Ambassador Schuwer held a speech about the importance of operation Market Garden during WWII. Chairman of the adoption Foundation, mr Ton Hermes told the story of 2Lt Willis Utecht who was killed in action during operation Market Garden as a airborne platoon commander. He was missing in action until 1994 when a Dutch farmer found his remains near Nijmegen. He was reburied in Margraten and his grave is adopted since that date. The performance of the choir was a welcome addition and support for the commemoration ceremony. The following link gives an impression of the commemoration ceremony.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zjxHHWmQxGQ&feature=youtu.be>



Navy Capt Ammerlaan, ambassador Schuwer and Ton Hermes



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The Netherlands Embassy wrote the following report on the Market Garden Commemoration.

By Irene Rozendaal (Public Diplomacy, Press and Culture, Royal Netherlands Embassy)

Four words explain how Dutch people feel about their World War II liberators: “We will never forget.” We write them on ribbons that wrap around wreaths.

Dutch families live them while caring for the graves of fallen US soldiers in Margraten.

And the Margraten Men’s Choir express them when they sing. All three came together during a

wreath-laying ceremony on September 28 at the Netherlands Carillon in Arlington, Va., to

commemorate the 74th anniversary of Operation Market Garden. Allied forces, including servicemen from the United States, launched Operation Market Garden in 1944 in the Netherlands in an attempt to clear a path into Nazi Germany and end World War II.

The Netherlands Embassy organized the ceremony to mark the anniversary and honor the 8,301 American soldiers buried in the Netherlands American Cemetery and Memorial in Margraten.



The Margraten Men’s Choir sings during the commemoration ceremony.

Members of the Margraten Men’s Choir are descendants of families deeply attached to the history and importance of the Netherlands American Cemetery. Their families witnessed the bodies of American soldiers being transported through the village of Margraten, and many local men helped dig the graves of the cemetery in 1944 and 1945.

Dutch families have adopted every grave, and they visit the cemetery regularly to pay respects to the fallen soldiers. The waiting list for adopting a grave is more than 500 people long.

Ambassador Henne Schuwer said during the ceremony that the Netherlands remains grateful for the risks the allies took to liberate Europe, and he thanked the choir for performing and helping honor the fallen.

“They tell their story in their songs. They tell the story of their liberators, they tell the story of hope, they tell the story of the enjoyment of freedom that we have experienced since 1945, and they do that in their songs,” Ambassador Schuwer said.

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“They perform their songs all over to spread the word of our gratitude for the state in which we live, for the liberation that we experienced,” he said.

Carillonneur Edward Nassor played “The Star-Spangled Banner” and “The Wilhelmus” on the Netherlands Carillon after an impressive two minutes of silence in which the only sound was the rustling of the American and Dutch flags in the wind.

The Margraten Men’s Choir and the Foundation for Adopting Graves American Cemetery Margraten visited the United States to tell the story of Margraten during the September 28 ceremony.

Ton Hermes, chairman of the Foundation for Adopting Graves American Cemetery Margraten gave a speech during the ceremony.

“Thousands of American soldiers were quartered in our homes, schools, and everywhere. Photos were made, and local people got connected to families in the United States,” Hermes said. “For a long period of time, the soldiers stayed with the people of Margraten, leading to personal friendships and strong bonds.” Sadly, Hermes said, some of those soldiers were killed on the battlefield and buried in the Netherlands American Cemetery. 25 American veterans also attended the wreath-laying ceremony. They were thankful that the Netherlands still remembers American soldiers who were killed during World War II.



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Friday September 28

American WWII Orphans Network Conference (AWON) Crystal Palace Marriott Hotel WDC

On Friday evening both the Adoption Foundation and the Mens Choir attended the AWON Gala gathering at the Crystal Palace Marriott Hotel in WDC. We had the opportunity to speak about the adoption program in Margraten and the choir sang a number of songs. Also the adoption documentary was shown. This moved the audience to tears. Although not all fathers of AWON members are buried in Margraten they also participated in our tribute to those who gave their lives for peace in the world.



Below is a reaction of the organisers of the Gala gathering.

Dear Ton & Teun,

I couldn't let another day go by without thanking the Mergelland Mannenkoor and the Stichting Adoptie Graven Amerikaanse Begraafplaats for making our AWON Gala Gathering so special.

*Both Diane and I have been receiving many compliments stating it was one of the best ... if not **THE** best AWON conference ever! I think much of the praise should go to you. The choir had a major impact on the members. When you sang "Home on the Range" I saw one of our members (who is very ill) sitting there, smiling and singing along with you. It brought me to tears. Of course, when you sang Elvis's "Can't Help Falling in Love With You", it did bring me to tears! That song was one of my husband's favorite, and it was the first song played at his Celebration of Life in May.*

Both Diane and I hope the members of the MMK and the Adoption Foundation and their families enjoyed themselves while visiting the U.S. We are so grateful you could be a part of the AWON family at our Gala Gathering. Many of our members' fathers are buried elsewhere, but for that brief moment this past weekend, we were all Dutch!

Heartfelt thanks to the members and their families and until we meet again....

Hugs,

Billie & Diane

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Saturday September 29

Commemoration WWII monument WDC

At 10 am a wreathlaying ceremony took place at the WWII monument in WDC. A large crowd attended this ceremony among them many veterans, AWON-members, 2nd and 3rd generation next of kin and a number of civilian and military officials.



The choir sang a number of songs on a very special place. Wreaths were layed at the Pacific and Atlantic Memorial. The presence of the Dutch delegation was an enrichment of the ceremony and showed the gratefulness of the Limburg and Dutch people to the American sacrifices made in WWII.

As the Netherlands ambassador stated: the adoption program is an important element of Dutch-American friendship.



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Saturday September 29

Performance in Orange Baptist Church (Orange Village Virginia)
(123 West Main Street Orange, VA)



Immediately after the wreath-laying ceremony at the WWII Memorial, the choir and the Foundation travelled to Orange, Va., to perform at the Orange Baptist Church. The Netherlands Embassy arranged a bus for transportation. People of the church had prepared a meal for the Dutch delegation and the church started to fill with people of the Orange community.

A full church listened to the introduction of the adoption program in Margraten and saw the Foundations' documentary. An emotional public stood up in applause.

After an emotional performance and a lot of applause in the crowded church, one of the members of the choir, Harrie van Beers, former mayor of Margraten, took the microphone to highlight the bond between the United States and the Netherlands. He told the audience the choir was honored to perform for their American friends. Its performance was a way of thanking the United States for liberating the Netherlands during World War II. The friendship between the Netherlands and the United State "has all to do with ordinary people, and the relationship between them. ... I sincerely hope that this will be an everlasting friendship. This is also important for the upcoming generation because we have so many values to share."

The Margraten Men's Choir and the Foundation for Adopting Graves American Cemetery Margraten are the perfect illustration of the Dutch commitment to honor American World War II soldiers.



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MERGELLAND **Mannenkoor**



The following link gives an impression of the performance in Orange Village.

<https://www.facebook.com/NLintheUSA/videos/2199280833690307/>

CBS news also announced the performance in Orange Village

<https://www.cbs19news.com/content/news/Special-concert-celebrating-American-lives-lost-in-WWII-in-Holland-493989041.html>

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