

**Speech by Admiral Rob Bauer,  
Netherlands Chief of Defence,  
change of command ceremony,  
Hall of Knights, The Hague, on 15 April 2021**

Excellencies,  
Flag and general officers,  
Men and women of the armed forces,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

...and in particular my wife Maaïke and our three children, Bente, Teun and Bram, and.... my mother, 91 years old and alive and kicking.

... and of course also the family of General Eichelsheim: Gea, Rick, Ruby and Thomas, and his parents,

In 1985, I swore allegiance to the head of state and obedience to the laws and military discipline.

I chose to serve.

To serve a greater good: the protection of our democracy.

From the outset, I felt that I was part of a greater whole.

I still feel that way.

There is an invisible bond between service members that transcends wars and generations.

In a world of the "me", we decide each day to fight for the "we".

That is our purpose in life.

It is a purpose that both enriches us and demands great sacrifices.

From ourselves and from our families.

Today, our thoughts are also with colleagues who are no longer with us.

With those who made the ultimate sacrifice to protect what we value...

... the emptiness in this hall is nothing compared to the emptiness that they have left behind.

They deserve our greatest respect.

As do their families and colleagues, who have found the strength to carry on.

To soldier on.

It is the security of comradeship that gives us the strength to deal with this loss.

Ladies and gentlemen, I invite you to join me in observing a minute of silence for service members who lost their lives while performing their constitutional duties.

*Please stand.*

*Parade commander, please give the order for those in uniform to stand to attention and salute.*

(...)

*Thank you.*

*Ladies and gentlemen, please be seated.*

*Parade commander, please give the order for those in uniform to stand at ease.*

(...)

My assumption of office as Chief of Defence in 2017 went differently than planned.

And that would become a guiding theme: expect the unexpected.

At the time, I stated that I would say no if something could not be done.

And so I did.

Even though it was less black and white than people sometimes think.

For example, shortly after assuming office, I was informed that the Netherlands could not deploy enough military personnel for the EU Battlegroup in the first half of 2018.

Following an investigation and consultations with our minister, I informed the EU just before Christmas that it was unfortunately not possible.

I added, however, that we *would* be able to do it within a slightly longer period of time.

While it was not an easy message, it was honest and realistic.

Fortunately, those qualities were also appreciated by our allies.

And at least as important, our people were spared the challenge of delivering more than they actually could.

Our organisation really needed that respite.

As the minister rightly said, the scars of 30 years of spending cuts were still painfully apparent.

During my first working visits, I therefore encountered a somewhat resigned attitude.

“Seeing is believing, Admiral.”

To be honest, I understood that attitude.

A great deal had to be done to ensure that an organisation that had become accustomed to stretching every cent as far as it would go would once again have water on tap.

Literally, in some cases.

Now, three and a half years later, we can safely say that:

- the situation of service members has demonstrably improved;

- the 2019 agreement on terms and conditions of employment has had a major positive effect;
- the IT infrastructure is being improved;
- the new F-35s, Chinooks and MRTT aircraft, as well as operational wheeled vehicles, are entering service;
- major steps have been taken in the modernisation of Apache helicopters, CV90s and Fenneks;
- important decisions have been made regarding the new combat support ship and the replacement of the multi-purpose frigates, minehunters and submarines;
- and above all, far more attention is now paid to physical and social safety throughout the armed forces.

There is still a long way to go in all of these areas.

But we are on the right track together.

I noticed this in the atmosphere during my later working visits: there is hope and confidence again.

It must be noted, however, that this confidence is fragile.

The steps taken in the coming years will be crucial.

We therefore worked together on the Defence Vision 2035, which sets us on a new course.

To be ready for the unexpected with our armed forces, we will

have to invest heavily in our business continuity and in innovation, particularly in the digitalisation of the battlefield.

The armed forces need long-term clarity from the political leadership regarding the course being taken and the budget.

(...)

I would now like to thank the Minister of Defence for the professional manner in which she responded to crisis situations.

Ank, you were never unsettled by events and never shied away from taking acceptable, residual risks.

My thanks also go to the State Secretary for Defence, for her tremendous efforts, commitment and sense of responsibility.

Barbara, you rightly and unfailingly asked difficult but good questions.

I thank the members of the Board of Governance under the distinguished chairmanship of our Secretary-General.

Gea, thank you for the good cooperation and the mutual trust. I could always count on you.

I thank my subordinate commanders and the senior NCO of the armed forces for the incisive debate that we engaged in.

Two Robs, Martin, Dennis, Arie-Jan, Mario, Theo and René, and predecessors Leo, Emile, Elanor and Nico:

Thank you for that incisive debate.

...always with respect for each other's position...

...always business-like...

...and always to make the whole greater than the sum of the parts.

We grew closer together in recent years.

This was also clearly felt during my farewell working visits.

Through Admiral Kramer, I would like to specially thank the Royal Netherlands Navy, the organisation from which I came, for the cordial manner in which it made me crawl through the mud...

Just so that I could briefly experience how things have – hardly – changed in 40 years...

Ultimately, you do what the sergeant orders.

And carry on by strength of will when the body has had enough...

Returning to the here and now, my thanks to the Defence Staff, to all directors and their teams, for their efforts and professionalism.

Thanks also to all members of my personal office for their inexhaustible efforts and dedication.

Last but not least, a short word of thanks to my family.

Maaike, I have always been able to count on you over the years, no matter what.

A huge thanks to you, and of course the children, for that.

I am looking forward to our forthcoming adventure in Brussels.

(...)

Ladies and gentlemen,

It was an honour to serve as the Netherlands Chief of Defence.

I will continue to work for our security as Chairman of NATO's Military Committee.

I will continue to serve.

Always as part of the greater whole.

General Eichelsheim, dear Onno,

Today, in the heart of our democracy, I hand over command to you.

In a centuries-old hall, with a ceiling that is modelled after a ship's hull.

The setting could not be more appropriate.

You will later be at the helm.



In the coming years, you will also experience that the buck stops here, with you...

There is no other service member that you can call.

I have every confidence that you can bear this heavy responsibility.

Knowledge is power, character is more.

You have both in abundance.

I wish you all the best in the fulfilment of this task.

As a former drummer, I can say that there are a few parallels with the highest military office...

You have to listen to the tone of the music.

Do not overwhelm.

But also keep the beat.

And at a few crucial moments indicate: now!

All in the knowledge that *every* instrument counts.

Together... we are stronger.

Together... we are more.