

**Speech by new Chief of Defence, General Onno Eichelsheim,
on the occasion of the change of command ceremony
in the Hall of Knights, The Hague, on 15 April 2021**

Your excellencies, flag and general officers, men and women of the armed forces, veterans, ladies and gentlemen at home,

Over 15 years ago, the first Chief of Defence accepted command of the armed forces.

And not entirely by coincidence, that also took place here in the Hall of Knights.

This location symbolises why military personnel do what they do... and it emphasises the place held by the armed forces in our society: at its very heart.

On land, at sea and in the air.

We serve our democracy and protect our society.

(...)

I have just accepted command from a colleague for whom I have enormous respect.

Admiral Bauer began unexpectedly and at a difficult time.

Not many people would have wanted to be in his shoes... but he stepped up to the plate and did what was expected of him: he took responsibility.

Rob is a military leader with vision, who oversees the bigger picture perfectly.

He thinks ahead and is willing to set his own interests aside.

Qualities that will certainly serve him well in his new job.

But the best thing about Rob – and that is perhaps not always noticed – is that he cares a great deal about his people.

If they are harmed, that affects him deeply.

Rob, I look back with gratitude on our cooperation, our conversations, your openness, your trust, and most of all, your friendship.

No-one else can explain seemingly complex dilemmas as clearly as you can.

In plain language, peppered with humour and always with sharpness of wit.

Admiral Bauer is a veritable builder, a connector... someone who doesn't back off when things get tough, but who stands up and takes the initiative.

And that is exactly what you should expect from a Chief of Defence... and from a future Chairman of NATO's Military Committee.

The right man for the job.

(...)

Rob, your departure marks the start for me.

As a token of gratitude and on behalf of the armed forces as a whole, I would like to present to you, the flag of the Chief of Defence.

It is a tribute to your leadership, your drive and your dedication to our people over the past years.

Entirely according to tradition, 'the youngest member of your crew' will now present this to you.

Thank you for everything you have done, Rob.

(...)

Ladies and gentlemen,

Every government makes choices when it comes to the military.

Those choices are sometimes expressed in a few numbers.

We now have:
More than 100 ships...
Over 10,000 vehicles...
More than 175 helicopters and planes...
And around 60,000 people.

But these numbers say nothing about what really drives us:
how we should act in the ever-changing environment in which we protect
ourselves and our allies.

And they say nothing about what a life of liberty is really worth to us.

(...)

We feel pretty safe here in the Netherlands.

Trouble spots seem a long way away from us.

But they're not.

Ukraine, Crimea, Syria: the repercussions of the conflicts there can be felt
here too.

In our economy, for example, and also in the number of refugees entering
our country.

During my career, I was often close to the fire.

Because of that, I know that on the spectrum between war and peace
there is a large grey zone in which real danger lurks every day.

Terrorism, cyber espionage and sabotage are treacherously close.

The naivety and belief that they won't affect us must be well and truly set
aside.

With that increased threat in mind, the Minister, the State Secretary and
my predecessor have worked tirelessly to ensure that, after years of cuts,
investments are once again being made in the military.

It is now up to us to put the Defence Vision into practice.

To work towards a digitised and high-tech military that can withstand the wide range of threats.

A military that can cope much faster with vast amounts of data so that we know before our adversaries where, when and how we can intervene to prevent worse from happening.

To work towards state-of-the-art IT, infrastructure and a fully staffed military, with a modern personnel system for regular military personnel, civilians and reservists from engaged employers... flexible and robust at the same time.

That is what I will be building on in the coming years and what I stand for:

A military force on which the Netherlands can always rely.

On which our allies can always rely.

That is my responsibility... and you can trust me on that.

(...)

But I cannot do it alone.

We'll do it together.

With our people.

My dear colleagues,

The armed forces will become more competitive... with your help.

The armed forces will be able to keep one step ahead and innovate... with your help.

You have chosen to serve our democracy and protect our society.

You and I will do that together.

We are the armed forces.

(...)

At the moment, however, the continuity of the armed forces is under threat... and that has implications.

My operational commanders were recently extremely open and honest about this.

And I will be honest about it too.

To counter that threat, we need a military that is different from the one we have now.

Cyber, information, and flexible, self-reliant units need to be put at the forefront.

That will make us competitive, innovative and information-driven, enabling us to deliver what is expected of us.

But we're not there yet.

At the moment, the Netherlands is not delivering on its commitment to our allies.

That undermines our credibility as a collective and damages our own interests at the same time.

A 'no' from the Netherlands means that we cannot defend our own territory or that of our allies... that we cannot conduct the missions that are needed.

It means that we cannot provide all Dutch citizens with the security prescribed by the Constitution.

It means that we will ultimately lose the war, because we're ignoring the threat and saying 'no' to freedom.

(...)

You have to be able to trust in a military that can defend our kingdom... one that keeps the heart of our democracy alive.

That comes at a price.

A budget that is high enough to provide our people with the necessary means and information position.

A long-term, steadfast commitment from all of you.

Because in the dangerous regions in which our military personnel are doing the job the government has asked them to do, they should be given the best conditions in which to win and to survive.

We owe that to all our military personnel, to our allies and to ourselves.

Even if we sometimes come back wounded, we are not defeated.

We are serving our democracy and protecting our society.

'My' military personnel are thus the military personnel of each and every Dutch citizen.

That deserves appreciation and respect. That deserves your support.

Your 'yes'... to our freedom.

(...)

Valued colleagues, fellow countrymen and women, and political representatives,

I would like to thank the government and our elected representatives for the confidence placed in me to fulfil this role.

In the ever more transparent society in which we live, you and around 17 million people will be looking over our shoulders.

With your support, I will live up to my responsibility as the Chief of Defence and will implement the changes that are needed.

We will do that together, as a team.

You can count on me.

And I am counting on you.

(...)

Ladies and gentlemen,

To bring this ceremony to a close, our national anthem will be played.

May I ask you all to stand, if you are able to do so?

Parade commander, the *Wilhelmus* please.