

**Speech by the Netherlands Minister of Defence
Ank Bijleveld-Schouten,
on the occasion of the change of command from Admiral
Bauer to General Eichelsheim on 15 April 2021 in The
Hague**

Speaker of the Senate,
First Deputy Speaker of the House of Representatives,
Flag and general officers,
Assembled men and women of the military,
Veterans,
Ladies and gentlemen,
Viewers at home,

Today you are witness to an exceptional event.
I bid you welcome to this change of command ceremony in
these times of coronavirus, also on behalf of the Netherlands
State Secretary for Defence, Barbara Visser.

You see here a ceremony that has been scaled down
significantly, but that retains the dignity befitting a change of
command.

Anyone can watch today's ceremony.
The entire country can bid farewell to the man who has been
our Chief of Defence for the last four years.

And we welcome the man who will head our armed forces in the
coming years.

The armed forces spend every day working for the freedom we
all enjoy.
Our freedom, which cannot be taken for granted.

Members of the military are aware that the job ultimately
carries the risk of life and limb.

Today I will address you first, Admiral Bauer, Rob.

You have been my military adviser over the past years, and through me you also advised the prime minister and the government.

We started together, actually, in 2017, at a turbulent point in time.

Our first task was to restore confidence.
The confidence of our personnel in the organisation.
And the confidence of society in the Ministry of Defence.

Confidence was also key in our first major challenge.
We had to determine whether we could resume our contribution to MINUSMA, and to Kidal in particular.

Whether we still had confidence in mission safety.

Two members of the Netherlands armed forces were killed in a mortar shell incident in 2016.

The matter led to a critical report by the Dutch Safety Board.

The decision to resume the mission was difficult, but carefully considered.

Because some of the men and women involved were the same age as our children.

As you so aptly put it:
there must be no doubt about mission safety. Our people should be able to do their vital work with confidence.

We travelled to Mali together shortly after the mission there had started.

To visit the hospital and a field hospital.
To talk to our servicemen and women.
It left a lasting impression.
Rob, we both took office at a challenging time, but you were right there, from day one.

You know how to reach people with your genuine interest, military humour and a sympathetic ear.

An example to illustrate the kind of person you are: when we attended the local Veterans' Day celebrations in Leidschendam, you joined the troops as a fellow veteran.

You are always game for crawling through mud, jumping into an ice-hole, or joining a patrol in the searing heat.

And yet: you and I had to get used to each other.

The politician and manager from the village of IJsselmuiden, and the navy man from Amsterdam.

"Knowledge is power, character is more..." You read that motto as a young midshipman entering the 'Zaaltje' at the Royal Naval College in Den Helder.

Many years later I can confirm: when you enter a room here in The Hague, there is no shortage of character.

We managed to gain each other's trust, we debated, we laughed, and we had real conversations.

I truly appreciated that.

In the end, we learned to harness our differences to increase our strength.

Because armed forces that embrace diversity have power.

Together we won ground, little by little, in restoring the organisation's trust.

We implemented the Defence White Paper together with the Board of Governance.

But the ability to finally invest again, after decades of cuts, does not immediately result in smiles and applause all round.

It requires extremely hard work, innovation and modernisation.

We had a great deal of catching up to do. Overdue maintenance with regard to both personnel and materiel was an issue, and still remains so.

As the national and international ambassador for the Netherlands Ministry of Defence, you excelled at telling this complex narrative.

Whether in a huge venue such as Ahoy, or in a tiny meeting room with a handful of managers... in Leeuwarden or in New York... you were always able to convey the MoD narrative.

You spoke of the work that the members of our armed forces do, of their strength and their can-do mentality.

And about the importance of support from politicians and the public.

A narrative that you told with such passion and enthusiasm.

For your lecture at the Elsevier Defence debate you brought along a cardboard helmet.

In 1830, soldiers were issued with such helmets when the Netherlands was caught unawares by the Belgian Revolution.

You drew a telling picture of the pain that is caused when we are called upon to render assistance without the resources to do so properly.

That paper hat symbolised the urgent cry from our organisation, from the commanders and myself, for essential investment.

Our security should be worth something to us.

Rob, over the past years we have worked together with the state secretary, the Board of Governance and all the commanders on a vision in which we wanted to convey the importance of a long-term view.

How important it is to value our security.

A vision in which we argue for being a strong ally not only in our words, but also in our deeds.

A vision that indicates that, given the threats, things cannot remain as they are.

Fighting for a secure future. Nothing could be more clear.

Because if there is one thing our enemies hate, it is a strong alliance.

That is why we, as a country, are proud that you are taking on the role of Chair of the NATO Military Committee.

It demonstrates a great level of trust in you, as a person who brings people together internationally, and in the Netherlands, within the alliance of 30 countries.

You will be relocating to Brussels, together with your daughter, who will be studying there.

Excellent company on this new adventure, no doubt. 😊

I also want to thank your family who supported you and are clearly happy to see you take this exciting new role.

I am confident that you will thrive.

Rob, thank you for your hard work, I wish you every success at NATO.

(...)

Admiral Bauer,

Would you please take a seat here in front of me?

You have just transferred command to General Eichelsheim.

Please allow me another moment to address you.

It is clear that your efforts have been of great value to Dutch society and to the international military community.

You have proved yourself service-minded, versatile, determined and innovative.

For that reason, His Majesty the King is pleased to appoint you Commander in the Order of Orange-Nassau, with swords.

Before I proceed with the presentation of the decoration accompanying this Royal Honour, I invite my aide-de-camp to read out the Royal Decree.

Ladies and gentlemen, would you please all rise?

Parade commander: please call the troops to attention and open the proclamation.

(...)

Thank you. Please be seated.

The time has come for me to address the new Chief of Defence: General Eichelsheim.

An air force man with a great deal of operational experience. 34 years ago you walked into the Royal Military Academy, a bit of a handful, I gather.

I don't think that's the case any more.

In 1990 you completed your pilot training, and in the years that followed you gained your operational experience.

You were deployed to Bosnia as a helicopter pilot, and a second time as flight commander.

Two missions to Afghanistan followed.

You are the first ever Chief of Defence in possession of a combat decoration.

You were awarded that decoration for your deployment as commander of the Apache detachment in Afghanistan.

You were part of an important period in the history of our armed forces.

Yesterday evening a far-reaching decision was reached with regard to that mission.

It is telling that you never mentioned your work in Afghanistan in interviews.

This fits with the character of a helicopter pilot: taking risks, rescuing others, thinking fast and acting even faster - but they would rather you did not make a fuss about it.

In 2016 you became the head of the Defence intelligence and security service, the MIVD.

It is of added value that as the Chief of Defence you already have ample knowledge of cyber, one of the areas in which war and conflict are developing at lightning speed.

Our first real collaboration concerned the matter of the OPCW.

An attempt by spies from the Russian GRU, here in The Hague, to hack the organisation that seeks to eliminate the use of chemical weapons.

Exactly the kind of incident that falls only just below the threshold of war.

Together we were able to explain in detail at a press conference why this was so very serious and how decisively the MIVD was able to act.

This event set the tone for our relationship. It was immediately clear to me that you are knowledgeable, and at the same time very approachable for your people.

Whenever you meet people, you say, "Just call me Onno" – to the consternation of the more deferential members of the military.

You also like to show the man behind the uniform.

Of the people present here today, there are four who know you through and through: your family.

Onno, you too enjoy the support of your wife, Gea, and your three children.

Members of the armed forces always have a home front, a base on which they can rely.

I know that you will support Onno as he takes on the challenge ahead.

It will not always be easy.

Our armed forces face great challenges.
A military surge in China, Russia readying missiles pointed at Europe, and troops on the border with Ukraine.

Dictators trampling over democracy in countries around the world.

A changing climate that is causing natural disasters.
The ongoing coronavirus pandemic, which is placing great demands on the military.

Troubled times in which facts have become open to debate, and disinformation has become a weapon.

What better place to talk about such matters than here, in the Hall of Knights?

The venue for our annual Veterans' Day.
This historical space is located at the very heart of our democracy, in between the Senate and the House of Representatives.

The walls display texts from our Constitution.
Full of values that our armed forces protect.
The right to a free vote.
The right to equal treatment.
The armed forces are the shield that protects this Constitution.

We must not lose sight of this.
We have lived in freedom for 76 years, but that does not
guarantee freedom in the future.

Much is still needed to ensure that our organisation is equipped
to deal with current and future threats.

We will have to keep fighting for a safe future.

I have every confidence that the armed forces have the right
person at the helm for the coming years.

My dear Onno, I wish you every success!