Ladies and gentlemen,

A little over seventy years ago, on April 4th 1945, Lieutenant John Gordon Kavanagh peered through his binoculars at a Dutch town, with the church spire clearly visible. The town he was looking at was Doesburg, on the IJssel river, my home town. It was still in enemy hands and the German garrison did not show any signs of weakening yet. Standing in a ditch, which he hoped would give him cover, John Kavanagh kept his eyes fixed at Doesburg for just a little while longer. When the shooting died down for a moment, his mind wandered off and he started to think about all the things that had happened to him during the last four years.

John was the son of Mrs. Cora Kavanagh of Toronto and he was married to Mrs. Emily Jean Haddleton, who was born in Kensington, London, in England. John attended the Riverdale Collegiate Institute in Toronto, Ontario where he was very strong in athletics. After that he worked as an office clerk to the manager of the Athletics Department at the T. Eaton Company in Toronto. And then he decided to join the Canadian Army. Why he did this, we don’t really know. Perhaps he wanted to do his part in the struggle against Nazi Germany or perhaps it was a sense of adventure that made him decide to enlist. It could also very well have been a combination of these and other motives.

In July 1941, after a long and hazardous voyage across the Atlantic, he arrived in England with his regiment, The Queen’s Own Rifles. His wife Emily would go overseas as well and work for the Canadian Red Cross in Europe. Month after tedious month they just practised and held exercises in the English countryside. But on June 6th 1944, with the invasion in Normandy, this all changed. Finally they were going to have their baptism of fire. John Kavanagh and his regiment, that belonged to the 3rd Canadian Infantry Division, were among the first troops to go ashore on Juno Beach, the first stop on what was ultimately going to be a long and demanding route to Germany.

In the ten months that had passed since D-Day, John had been involved in three major battles: the one in Normandy, the campaign to clear the Scheldt estuary in The Netherlands and thereby open up the port of Antwerp, and finally the Rhineland offensive, which had brought him into Germany for the first time. He had witnessed how hundreds of his comrades and friends had been killed or had suffered terrible wounds. The worst experience for him, as a Lieutenant platoon commander, were the casualties among his own men. He himself had been lucky so far, with bullets and fragments of shells nearly missing him on numerous occasions.
On 23rd March 1945 the Allies finally crossed the Rhine near the German city of Wesel. After they had established a large bridgehead across this river, the Canadian army turned left, with the intention to liberate the northern part of the Netherlands as quickly as possible. The Canadian units came back to fight on Dutch soil and in the first week of April they ended up in front of the town of Doesburg.

Lieutenant John Kavanagh did not know what to expect. He realized it would be difficult to take the town by force, as the surrounding terrain appeared to be completely flat and did not provide any covered approaches. And if the Germans kept on shooting on everything that moved, a frontal attack on the town could turn into a very bloody affair. For this reason the Queen's Own Rifles were given the order to reconnoiter the area and find out if there was a better and safer route to the town, possibly through the small villages of Achter-Drempt and Rha along the IJssel. Lieutenant Kavanagh played a key role in this mission that took place on April 6th.

As one of the most experienced platoon commanders of B-company he took the initiative and his platoon was going to lead the attack. Initially everything went well. They made good progress and they were getting nearer and nearer to the Doesburg church tower. But suddenly, as they were closing in on the hamlet of Rha, there was that awful but all too familiar sound of gun fire ringing through the air. Lieutenant Kavanagh was hit by a Panzerfaust (a German type bazooka) almost immediately and he was killed instantly. During the fire fight that followed, five of his men were also mortally wounded. The Germans managed to successfully beat off this Canadian attack on Doesburg and they continued to defend the town until the 16th of April – so for another ten days – until their position became untenable and they quietly withdrew across the IJssel river.

John Kavanagh’s body was never found or, more likely, it was found but never identified. This means he has no marked grave. His name, therefore, is inscribed in the memorial wall at the Canadian military cemetery in Groesbeek near the city of Nijmegen. This memorial wall, that lists the names of 1047 soldiers, commemorates all the men of the Commonwealth forces who were killed in north western Europe but who have no known grave. Looking at all those names, so neatly inscribed in this wall, is a very chilling experience, indeed.

Precisely a month after John Kavanagh and his comrades had been killed, the war in the Netherlands was finally over. On May 5th 1945 the commander of the German forces in the Netherlands formally surrendered to the Canadian General Charles Foulkes. All of the Netherlands was free again, thanks to their Canadian, British, Polish and American allies.

Nowadays, Canadians and Dutch, live in rather affluent societies that are politically stable and in which we are free and relatively secure. We also know that in a lot of places in the world people - men, women and children – are a lot worse off. Many of them are the victims of war and violence, sometimes because they simply happen to live in the wrong place at the wrong time, and sometimes because they are deliberately persecuted and terrorized as a result of their ethnic background or their religion. It is a sad conclusion, but evil – in whatever form or shape – never sleeps. We cannot and should not close our eyes to that fact.
Canada has a long humanitarian and benevolent tradition of trying, whenever it can, to make the world a little better and safer. It has a long tradition of trying, under the flag of the United Nations, to restore international peace and stability. As a matter of fact, it was the Canadian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Lester Pearson, who invented the concept of United Nations peacekeeping in the 1950s. Since then Canadian forces have taken part in countless peacekeeping and peace enforcement operations all over the world, sometimes under very difficult and hazardous circumstances. I would therefore like to take the opportunity today to convey my feelings of gratitude to you, the Canadian people, for your decade long and unrelenting devotion to world peace.

During my career as a soldier I have stood face to face with evil many times and in many places: in Lebanon, in Africa, in Bosnia and in Afghanistan. In Bosnia, back in the 1990s, I had the privilege of working closely together with Canadian troops for the first time, and I was impressed not only by their professionalism, but also by their strong commitment to help war-torn Bosnian society back on its feet again. And when you read General Lewis MacKenzie’s book Peacekeeper, you will discover how difficult and dangerous the situation for the Canadian soldiers was at the time, especially in the besieged city of Sarajevo.

In Afghanistan I again had the honour to cooperate and fight shoulder to shoulder with the Canadian Armed Forces, as both our countries were actively involved in the International Security and Assistance Force. The job there was far from easy, the tasks were manifold and they demanded much from our men and women. And we also suffered casualties. During the time I was Commander of ISAF’s Regional Command South, 33 Canadian soldiers were killed in South Afghanistan. I will never forget and always honour the sacrifice that these young men and women made.

During his first state visit to Canada, a month ago, King Willem-Alexander of the Netherlands in his dinner speech at Rideau Hall told his guests how impressed he had been, when on a visit to Dutch troops in Afghanistan in 2009, he, by chance, witnessed a ramp ceremony at the airbase in Kandahar. A young Canadian trooper, Karine Blais, of the Douzième Régiment Blindé du Canada had been killed when her patrol vehicle drove over an IED. “I will never forget that ceremony”, the King said, “It was night time, and the sky was lit up with stars. The base – normally so noisy with the constant roar of jets and helicopters – was silent. The only sound was the bagpipe that played when more than 2000 allied troops gave Karine a final salute.”

These words by King Willem-Alexander are very close to my heart. The respect that you, the Canadian people, have given to Karine Blais and other fallen soldiers on their last trip home, on the Highway of Heroes, is also something that I will always remember. As a soldier myself, I can assure you how important it is to the military to get this kind of support from the home front.

At first glance there seems to be no obvious link between our efforts in Afghanistan and the Second World War, but when we think about it a little more, we can distinguish a clear connection. There is a similarity, because in both cases, you, the Canadian people, provided the first signs of hope and peace after a traumatic experience. In Afghanistan after decades of war and in the Netherlands after a brutal occupation by the Germans and a period that is remembered by the name Hunger Winter in Dutch history. A period in which more than 20,000 men, women and children died of malnutrition and related diseases.
In both cases, you Canadians have shown a generous willingness to send your fathers, sons, daughters and friends into harm’s way and to have them fight for other people’s peace and freedom. And you do this, while knowing that these moral commitments are never without risk and that casualties sadly are unavoidable. It fills me with gratitude to know that whenever there is trouble in the world, Canada will always take up its responsibility. And I am not the only one, who would like to thank you for that.

Over the years the Dutch have shown their gratitude towards Canada not only in words but in deeds as well. Rha, the hamlet where Lieutenant Kavanagh and his comrades were killed on 6 April 1945, proves this point in an impressive way. A small monument was erected there to perpetually remember their sacrifice. It was built by the people of the village. And it is maintained by this close community as well. The brass is being polished, the grass is mown, the bushes trimmed and the tiles swept. This is not just a monument, it is the monument of the village. It is part of the village, just as the church and the windmill are. And everyone who moves to Rha from another town or village, will get the same message: welcome to our village and one of the things we ask of you, is to help out, now and then, to keep our Canadian monument in good repair, because we feel an obligation to live up to the words that are inscribed in this monument in golden letters, saying:

Dying for Freedom isn’t the worst that could happen, being forgotten is.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The Netherlands will never forget Canada’s selfless role in the Second World War. We will always remember that altogether more than 4,000 of your fellow countrymen died for our freedom on Dutch soil. Most of them are buried in one of the three Canadian military cemeteries in the Netherlands: in Bergen op Zoom, in Groesbeek and in Holten. These cemeteries are often the scene of impressive ceremonies that are attended by hundreds, sometimes even thousands of people. In Holten for example, every year on Christmas Eve school children place a burning candle at each of the nearly 1,400 graves. And not too long ago, on May 6th of this year, Private Albert Laubenstein from Saskatchewan was buried with military honours at the cemetery in Bergen op Zoom. His unmarked field grave was recently discovered by coincidence close to the Maas river and he was now given his final resting place among his comrades.

We will never forget Albert Laubenstein and we will never forget what your country has done since the end of the Second World War and the sacrifices it has made for world peace and freedom. You will be in our hearts forever.

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