

American Cemetery at Margraten

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A brief history of the American Cemetery and the grave adoption program in Margraten.



Originally the American Cemetery was designated to the U.S. Ninth Army. At first the 611th Graves Registration Company, led by Captain Joseph James Shomon, planned a location near the city of Sittard. But at the time Sittard was situated at the front line. When Shomon started his preparations for the cemetery his company was shot at by American and German units alike. So soon he was forced to look for another location.

After some cross-country reconnaissance, their attention was drawn to a field near the village of Margraten. There Shomon contacted Joseph van Laar, who later played a very important role in what became known as the local adoption tradition.

After Shomon had uttered his final and convincing statement: "Listen Joe, the best soil is not good enough for our boys," the decision making had been concluded and Margraten was definitely designated

as the area for the Ninth Army Military Cemetery.

In November 1944, the actual work in the field started.

That was the coldest winter in years, comparable to a Siberian winter, so the circumstances under which the "diggers" (the 3136th Quartermaster Service Company) had to do their work were the harshest imaginable.

On 10 Nov 1944, the first soldier was buried at Plot A, Row 1, Grave 1 (see location map). At this time, the fallen soldiers were buried in a linen bag accompanied by a brief ceremonial. Soon 19,000 soldiers were laid at rest at the cemetery.

Initially, the headstones were simple wooden crosses with the soldier's tags attached to it. A year later these crosses bore the soldier's name and service number.

The next of kin in the U.S. were offered the opportunity to bring the body of their beloved son, brother, or father back to the States to be buried at home. Many American families made the heart-rending decision not to bring back their beloved to the United States. They took into consideration that the beloved's last wish was to be buried next to his comrades.

More than 11,000 soldiers were brought back to their homeland and 8,300 stayed at Margraten.



In the waning days of World War II, a couple of months after the southern part of the Dutch Province of Limburg had been liberated by American units, a small Margraten civil committee picked up the idea of adopting graves at the cemetery. This occurred after Joseph van Laar had been asked by a Captain Lane to watch out for the grave of Captain Lane's nephew, John Land.

A growing number of American soldiers asked Joseph van Laar to visit a friend's grave every now and then. The committee soon had set up the complete register for the adoption of all the graves at the Ninth Army Military Cemetery.

When the new cemetery marked its first Memorial Day, Dutch citizens from 60 local villages collected 20 truckloads of flowers so that every American grave would be decorated on Memorial Day.

At the end of the 1940s the soldiers were reburied and their remains were placed in coffins made of steel and bronze.

By 1946 there were thousands of local, and later from all over the Netherlands, volunteers. In 2003, the task of the committee was handed over to the Foundation Adoption Graves American Cemetery Margraten. This foundation is still working on the revision of the adoption register. Now, younger generations are taking over the honor of taking care of one or more graves.

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On the Walls of the Missing are 1,722 names of soldiers who are MIA or not identified. In 47 occasions a name is accompanied by a bronze rosette, this means that the soldier has been found or identified.

The last burial, of 2nd Lt. Willis A. Utecht, took place on 19 September 1994. He was on the wall of the missing, but after the recovery of his remains and positive

identification he could be buried next to his "comrades." He is buried at N - 23 - 22. His grave is the only one in this row. His name, on the Wall of the Missing, is now accompanied by a bronze rosette.

The graves of Ralph J. Carter and Joseph Fernandez are two among the many adopted by my brother, Martijn Van Haren Martin. He managed to find the aunt and a sister of one of the dead soldiers.

Martijn still writes letters to them and sometimes he calls them. He has made me so proud that I am now doing the same myself.

Martijn and I have adopted more than 12 graves over the past couple of years. We have had a lot of contact with the family members of our adopted soldiers - most of whom reside in the United States.

Martijn and I have had our grave adoption story featured on several web sites. One web site of note is www.fallennotforgotten.nl. The mission of this Netherlands American Cemetery and Memorial Margraten web site is "telling the life stories, soldier by soldier." This site's purpose is to pay tribute to the young servicemen who gave their lives for freedom - making sure that these stories are not forgotten.



I am so proud of the American soldiers, for what they did in 44/45 in Holland...and to be honest we are one of the few countries that still have great feelings for the Americans....Almost all of the 8,300 graves are adopted!

We have honor for those who died for me and my son's freedom.

Some people think I over-react...but I don't think so. I feel so good about doing this. Some people save whales, some of them save nature.....and I...I honor those who died here in 1944/45.

Sincerely,

Jasper van Haren

Netherlands