

MAYORAL SPEECH, MANHAY, BELGIUM - WEDNESDAY, JUNE 2, 2004

Messrs the Governors,
Messrs the Burgomasters,
Messrs the elected members,
Ladies and Messrs the Counsellors,
Messrs the Officers and Soldiers,
Messrs the Ex-servicemen,
Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear Friends,

It's an honour to greet you in Manhay, for the commemoration of the 60th birthday of the Battle of the Bulge.

The academic part of this manifestation is going to take place not far from here, at the former train station where we will go all together in a few minutes. Then, we're going to unveil the commemorative tablet, in homage to the soldiers of the third Battalion of the 517th Paratrooper Infantry Regiment. The children will give roses to the Veterans, and we will decorate with flowers the new commemorative tablet

After this we will join the village hall where will be hold a reception in honour.

There you'll be able to see an exposition that has been organised by the committee of Manhay.

Finally, our American guests are going to rejoin their coaches that will bring them to their respective municipalities to continue their visits.

Before starting, let us meditate a few minutes in front of this memorial stone, which has been raised in remember to those who fought for our liberty.

(Depot d'une gerbe)

I'll ask now to the children of our primary schools to open the way.

60^{me} anniversaire de la bataille des Ardennes

I don't have known the war and a lot of people here are in the same situation as me.

The World War II and especially the battle of the Bulge is a part of remembers that our parents and grandparents have transmitted us.

A place, a house, old weapons, old photographs, a tank and some lists with names engraved on black stones in the squares of churches remember us that something sad, so terrifying and so devastating has happened.

Not so long ago I understood the horror of a war, a little bit by accident, viewing Steven Spielberg's film "Saving Privat Ryan". I can't look this film in one time because the pictures were so real that it makes realise the horror of a war like it happened in Manhay.

Today it's good to remember that our soldiers, many American soldiers and allied lost their life to defend our democracy and give back his liberty to our country.

Parents have lost their children and all of us know that's there the biggest tragedy in a life.

Those who survived, some of them honour us with their presence here today, are also marked for ever through the sufferings lived on the front Some of them were mutilated and all were bruised in their soul.

An ex-serviceman told me that were no days on which he didn't saw the terrifying pictures of the battles whom he took part. There were no days without tears in his life.

It's with a recognition feeling that the municipalities of Vielsalm, Stoumont, Lierneux, Trois Pont and Manhay are associated.

The burgomasters are wearing their scarves to thanks and to pay homage to those who sacrificed themselves to let us live with dignity.

December 1944, ordered by Hitler, the German troops started a violent offensive in the Ardennes to try to save the third Reich from the defeat Plan's code name was "Wacht am Rhein".

During 34 days, allied troops fought heroically against a German army determinate to retake the control of the Meuse River and the harbour of Antwerp.

Here's a short summary about what's happened during the battle in the area.

By the starting of the German offensive, the 16th December 1944, the rumour of the Germans comeback begins to spread in all the Ardennes.

The population couldn't believe if but again, such as in Mai 1940, refugees were fleeing the area and the military convoys were more and more frequent

Urgently called from the camps of Suippes and Sisonne, in France, your division, the 82nd airborne, composed by 11.000 men, was going across our village during the night between the 18 and 19 December to join the meeting point, located in Werbomont

After that, you returned on a large front in the sector of Cheneux-Trois-Ponts - Vielsalm to the Baraque de Fraiture.

Thanks to you, many American units, the armour and infantry, rescued of Saint-Vith, could return to your lines before an encircling, which certainly should have been a second Bastogne.

A little bit later, during this Christmas night, you're ordered by the top ranks of army to make a withdrawal to form a new defence line going from Trois-Ponts to Manhay and Hotton.

It's at this moment that the enemy attacked Manhay. The axle Baraque de Fraiture - Manhay, itinerary used by the Germans was also the limit between the army corps, what was causing some communication and organisation problems between the units.

Manhay and Grandmenil were falling in German hands during that Christmas night 1944.

In the staffs, it was again decided that Manhay must imperatively be retaken; The 25th December afternoon, an attack was organised by an infantry battalion and some tanks in support

A lot of infantrymen died in the fields in the north of the village.

The next day, a second attempt fell through again. It's at this time that was called upon to rescue the guys of the 517th paratrooper infantry regiment

With his driver, the officer commanding the third battalion, the colonel Forest Paxton, made a reconnaissance on the hilltops of Manhay.

He chooses that an attack by night must be realised on the east flank of the village.

On this side, the 1st battalion of the 325th Glider who's also pushing back the enemy's attack was occupying the locality of Vaux-Chavanne.

In the first hours of the 27th December, the artillery was making strong harassing firings on Manhay. In the same moment the paratroopers were attacking and advancing rapidly on the objective.

The assault was lightning, some salvos were falling too short and several men were victims of the bombardments, so the 1st lieutenant Floyd Scott of the company I who leads the assault

Under the grapeshot's, the platoon officers were crying "Let's Go - Come on, don't stop" to the men of the company H who were following, letting the male nurses take care of the injured.

When the paratroopers were entering in Manhay, they're shooting on the houses, the headquarter company guys were also there with their heavy weapons and were shooting with their bazooka.

Surprised to see the paratroopers in the heart of the hell, lot of Germans pushed their hands up to give up.

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The valorous GI's required less than 2 hours to retake the village of Manhay, they stayed until begin January before to take part on the counteroffensive in the area of Trois-Ponts - Grand-Halleux.

Before unveiling the commemorative tablet for thanks the action of the third Battalion of the 517 Paratrooper Infantry Regiment and before that each child from our municipality gives a flower to all the ex-servicemen, I wish to thanks all the persons and different committees, who gave their energy to prepare this day, and especially the CADUSA from Trois-Ponts and Gerard WILKIN elected member in Manhay.

Mister Luddow Gibbons, you were the only veteran present during the offensive in Manhay.

Could you please come with the two other veterans of the 517 regiment to help me raising the sail?

Could this moving moment remember us all that PEACE is a precious thing.

(Devoiler la plaque)

Dear Veterans of the World War II, could you please rejoin us. The children will give you the roses.