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RÉPUBLIQUE FRANÇAISE

AMBASSADE DE FRANCE AUX PAYS-BAS

**Remise des insignes d'officier de la Légion d'Honneur au
Lieutenant-Général Rob Verkerk**

(16 novembre 2018, port de Rotterdam)

Discours prononcé par Philippe Lalliot, Ambassadeur de France aux Pays-Bas

Ladies and Gentlemen, dear friends,
Dear Lieutenant-General Verkerk,

I am very pleased to welcome you all on this French Navy ship, called “La Somme”, together with Commander Arnaud Paquet. According to the French tradition, the supply ships are named after rivers.

Needless to say nevertheless, a few days after the commemoration of the 1918 Armistice, “the Somme” is first and foremost known for being a battlefield, one of the bloodiest of WWI, where French, German, British, Australian, South African and Indian soldiers fought a century ago. In this place, all fallen soldiers lay united in the soil so many died for, in the defense of my country and the essential values we cherish and still stand and fight for together: the rule of law, freedom and peace.

Today, it is a privilege and a pleasure for me to welcome you, Lieutenant-General Rob Verkerk, former Commander of the Royal Netherlands Navy, and to bestow upon you the insignia of Officer of the Legion of Honor in the presence of your family, your loved ones, friends and colleagues.

Let me first remind you that the National Order of the Legion of Honor was created by Napoleon Bonaparte in 1802. It is the most prestigious distinction the French Republic can offer. Always given on behalf of the President, it has a universal calling: to reward both military and civilian merit. Each honoree brings his or her talent to bear for the common welfare, in a particular field: military service but also accomplishments in the areas of economy, science, education, the arts, sports, or else in judicial, diplomatic or elective office. It also testifies to an exceptional commitment of the closest allies of our nation, especially to the rank of Officer.

Lieutenant-General Verkerk,

As a former Commander of the Royal Netherlands Navy, you are more than welcome on board of this French Navy ship.

Indeed, both our Navies were created centuries ago, the Royal Netherlands Navy in 1488 and the French Navy a bit later in 1624 by the Cardinal de Richelieu. They were both created with the same purpose: beat the Brits! They so joined forces in June 1667 during the Raid on the Medway and the Royal Netherlands Navy defeated the British Royal Navy, with the secret help of France, as mentioned in the book of the British historian, Nicholas Rodger (*The Command of the Ocean*). Since then our Navies have been sailing alongside for centuries on all oceans and, in the ever more instable and threatening world we live in, we very much hope our ties will even get stronger in the future.

Lieutenant-General Rob Verkerk,

The Royal Netherlands Navy remains today a reference in Europe, with its wide range of capacities, surface warfare, antimissile defense, mine counter measures, intelligence, amphibious forces, Special Forces and submarines. This is largely thanks to you and what you have done notably in your former capacity as Commander of the Royal Netherlands Navy.

You are a man of conviction and vision. You have notably always been committed to expeditionary capacities of the Royal Netherlands Navy. You have also always favored international cooperation. In 2015, you signed the Declaration of Intent of the European Amphibious Initiative, with ten other countries, including France. It is an important step forward in European amphibious cooperation, in which the Netherlands plays a vanguard role. Thanks to this, other countries can use each other's assets, like the Joint Support Ship *Karel Doorman*. For sure some of the largest and most effective landing platforms are based in Den Helder.

Along with the restoration of the Navy's capacities, you have constantly paid the greatest attention to the men and women under your command. You are known for your straightforwardness and your sense of humor, your mission command spirit and your result oriented mindset, your leadership and your unaffectedness. Those qualities allowed you to create special links with the sailors, *mariniers*, and civilians of the Royal Netherlands and, beyond cultural differences, Belgian Navies in your role of Admiral Benelux, commanding a truly combined and partly French speaking force.

Lieutenant-General Rob Verkerk,

You are also of course a man of action. Before reaching the very top of the Royal Netherlands Navy, you served as an officer in the *Korps Mariniers*. The numerous and challenging trainings you underwent such as parachute, commando and ski instructor, are really impressive.

You have been deployed in the most demanding operations: in the cold of the Arctic, in the heat of the desert, in the roughness of the mountain and in the wilderness of the jungle. I am not going to mention all your achievements throughout your long and rich career. Let me just highlight some of them.

In 1995, you were deputy chief operations of the French, British and Dutch brigade deployed on Mount Igman which liberated Sarajevo after having neutralized the heavy weapons which had besieged the city for years.

As Director of Operations, you led a Dutch mission against pirates along the Somalian coast. The Netherlands were one of the few to intervene in this highly dangerous environment. The operation *Baracuda* can be considered as one of the most impressive missions conducted by the Dutch Navy where Somalian pirate's mother ships were rapidly neutralized.

Under your command, the Royal Netherlands Navy was also engaged alongside allied forces with France in the Sahel region, again one of the most demanding environments, within the framework of EUFOR Chad and MINUSMA.

Last but certainly not least, during and after Hurricane Irma in September 2017, we acted hand in hand to provide help to the population of *Sint Maarten*, amongst them, one thousand Dutch and thirteen hundred French servicemen.

Lieutenant-General Rob Verkerk,

Your efforts in fostering international cooperation and putting your country at the forefront of it still pay off. Recently, during NATO exercise Trident Juncture, Commodore Huub Hulsker, Commander of the Netherlands Maritime Force, led an amphibious Task Group including French troops from 9^{ème} Brigade d'Infanterie de Marine. I find it a perfect example for collective defense, or any combined operations, maybe in the future under the auspices of the European Intervention Initiative.

I am also pleased to see that our cooperation extends beyond operations. I was very happy to welcome yesterday an important French delegation at NIDV with top innovative companies which are keen to enhance their partnership with

their Dutch counterparts. This Dutch-French industrial cooperation is indeed crucial in the building of an autonomous European Defense Industry.

As you can see, your awarding of the insignia of Officer in the Legion of Honor Order today is a well-deserved and long overdue token of the gratitude of my country for all your accomplishments, especially in reinforcing operational cooperation with French and allied Navies.

Lieutenant-Général Rob Verkerk, au nom du Président de la République et en vertu des pouvoirs qui nous sont conférés, nous vous remettons les insignes d'Officier de la Légion d'Honneur./.