

Your excellency, ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for joining this ceremony at this challenging time of the week and day in terms of traffic jams, particularly this Friday afternoon before the start of the soccer game between France and the Netherlands. I really appreciate your efforts to be here.

Ambassador Lalliot,

Thank you for the distinction I have just received. However, my role at the time of the relief operation after the hurricanes Irma and Maria was limited. Of course, as the Commander of the Royal Netherlands Navy, I was ultimately responsible. But the actual work was done by many others. Nevertheless, I am very honoured with this high decoration, which I consider to be a token of appreciation for all the military and civilian personnel involved on the Dutch side.

The award I just received, is an illustration of the good military cooperation between France and the Netherlands, not only in the West Indies but also in Europe and elsewhere in the world, for example on the African continent as in Mali. France and the Netherlands both have a global interest.

Of course, there are some minor cultural differences between our countries. I remember, for example, that in the mid-1990s, during the crisis in former Yugoslavia, we settled with a multinational brigade, consisting of French, British and Dutch military, in Mostar, where the international brigade staff was accommodated in a burned-down factory hall. After a few days, some British and Dutch officers were worried about air lint that looked suspiciously like asbestos. When it was brought to the attention of the French commander, General Soubirou – a legionnaire, he did not see the problem because (and I quote) we had been deployed there to ‘mourir pour le patrie’!

France has left an important mark on the Netherlands throughout history. As far as the navy is concerned, Den Helder developed mainly as a naval port because Napoleon wanted a maritime stronghold there, in view of England and the trade around the North. This led to the current position of ‘de stelling Den Helder’ as the main naval port we know today, with fortresses like Erfprins and Kijkduin.

Although the relationship between France and the Netherlands is undoubtedly good, this has not always been so. After all, it was the French Admiral Duquesne who, during the naval battle at Etna in 1676, ended the life of our most important naval hero, Admiral de Ruyter.

By coincidence, it was De Ruyter who took St Martin in 1648, after the peace of Westminster when the Spaniards left there at the end of the 80-year war. The French, however, had the same idea (of occupying St Martin) because they also considered a stronghold in that region of strategic importance. To prevent a sea battle, it was agreed that a Frenchman and a Dutchman would run from a certain point on the coast of St Martin in the opposite direction around the island. The border would then be drawn from the starting point to the point where they would meet again. If we look at the current border between the French and the

Dutch part of St Martin, it is clear that the French were running faster, or they have been cheating or that the Dutch were distracted by the indigenous female beauty.

Back to 2017. The damage on St Martin, but also on other islands, was incredible. There was a lot of criticism on the aid provided that, in the eyes of the population, arrived too slowly. A difficult side effect was that the assistance on St Martin would be compared quickly by the French and the Dutch population back home, with a high chance that both countries would be played off against each other in public opinion. Fortunately, this could be prevented by close coordination between France and the Netherlands, in which liaison officers were exchanged and by mutual support from the units that participated in the aid from both countries. On the French side, this included the FS Tonnerre and the FS Ventose; on the Dutch side, HNLMS Zeeland, HNLMS Pelikaan and HNLMS Karel Doorman, as well as the Marines and engineers of the Dutch army.

Finally, evil tongues claim that the natural disaster on St Martin had something to do with a Dutch attempt to make the entire island part of the Netherlands. Throughout history, the Netherlands had the habit of flooding itself when it was threatened, and then recovering the land from the water using wind power (dry grinding). Although the Dutch pretend to be a people that can control water and wind, I can assure you that these thoughts did not underlie the flooding and then the passage of the second hurricane, Maria, after Irma.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am glad that France and the Netherlands could be of significant help throughout the entire region in order to restore normal life. Thank you for your attention and Ambassador Lalliot, thanks for your kind words and the tribute France payed to me.