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General, Sir,

Dear ladies & friends, it is you that...

It is in you that I wish to address all those American soldiers who liberated the Dutch people here in this area of our country.

I do this with strong, emotional feelings of respect and genuine gratitude.

I was standing there with many of my confrères. Happy young men of 20 or so of age, happy because we had been liberated from the Germans, from oppression, hunger, fear, full of confidence, ready to enter into a free world, young and ready to defy the norms and changes of new times.

Here on the other side stood our Americans. I see them still clearly before me. They came straight from the front line - dirty shoes, some in long army coats: it was real dirty weather. They arrived in all kinds of army vehicles, but always with their inevitable guns for ~~savagery~~. They had left their own lands, their parents, wives, fiancées, their Christmashide at home. We were the same age, but how would they see their future, I wondered. Did they expect a new world. Would they survive after this hour of faithful togetherness? They would ^{soon} climb into their army vehicles, away into the dark, foggy night? Where to?

to one of the most dangerous areas in Europe - to Bastogne from where they had been freed by ~~from~~ the legendary George Patton.

Oh, how we admired that American General, we almost idolized him, who cut through the German armies like a hot knife through a pat of butter. We thought he was a daredevil, and for Eisenhower quite a broad fail.

Later on I heard about his world-famous prayer, Patton's Prayer. Some days ago I found the real story about it, as it was written by his chief army chaplain, Padre O'Neill.

"Pray always. Pray when driving, Pray when fighting. Pray alone. Pray by day. Pray by night. Pray for good weather, Pray for victory." 500,000 copies were distributed, all signed by the THIRD ARMY COMMANDER G. Patton.

We all knew how those prayer words helped. The dark swirling mists and heavy fogs cleared away and the allied planes destroyed the Nazi tanks. G. Patton prayed for fair weather. He got it.

I didn't pray much that Christmas night. I just looked and kept looking at the American soldiers.

What were they praying that night? Thinking?
Longing for? We just knew them as
nice guys, pleasant fellows. We the Dutch
Brothers had been with the American soldiers
for nearly 3 months. We had lodged them
in our convents, had our meals with them
and fought wild snowball fights in
our garden. I still smell their sweet
tobacco cigarettes.

When we heard about the Christmas here
in the camp we prepared a flat area on the
wall where they could sign their names and
of course our own names as a lasting memory
of their stay with us.

And now, 67 years later, I read their names
and in our photographs I see their helmets,
guns and their weary faces. I am overwhelmed
by gratitude, respect and by love of my
own freedom, which - for a great part -
I owe to these American friends.

General, Sir, I appreciate your presence
here with us at this Holy night!

May God bless you

May God bless America

Merry Christmas, and a Happy New Year.