

Bataan survivor never forgot

Shrum shared experience and his mess-kit map

CARY — At night, when the prison camp guards weren't looking, Robert Shrum created art. Using shards of metal, he scratched to scale a map of Bataan in the Philippines, near where he was stationed with the U.S. Army Air Corps during World War II. Shrum enlisted in 1941.

LIFE STORIES

BY BONNIE
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At the end of that year, the Japanese landed in Manila, and Shrum became a prisoner of war, forced to march for six days and more than 60 miles, in what is now known as the Bataan Death March.

Japanese forces herded 75,000 Allied captives — about 12,000 of them GIs — along pocked, bombed-out roads. Shrum and the rest of the troops got almost no food and water. Those who darted out of line to try to fill up canteens from streams were killed. Those who fell out of step, exhausted by the tropical heat, met a similar fate.

At least 6,000 prisoners died, and others escaped. The rest were taken to Japanese prison camps, where rations were meager. By the time Shrum was liberated in August 1945, he had lost considerable weight.

His experiences stayed with him forever, even



Robert Shrum arrives home in 1945 after being held as a POW by the Japanese.

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as he married, raised a family and forged a career as an architect. For the rest of his life, Shrum reflected on what he'd endured, giving talks to schools, clubs and military groups about his experience as a prisoner of war. He delivered his final presentation less than a month before he died. Though he could scarcely get out of bed, he rallied to give an impromptu lecture in his room at Durham's VA Hospital to a group of doctors who worked there.

Shrum died of multiple myeloma Sept. 22, a week shy of his 87th birthday.

Robert Marshall Shrum was born in 1921 in Irwin, Pa.

Shrum arrived in the Philippines about two months before the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. On Christmas Eve 1941, Shrum and his bomb group were converted to infantry, given rifles and bayonets and ordered to retreat to the southern tip of the Bataan Peninsula, where they held off the Japanese for more than three months.

When they surrendered on April 9, 1942, they were forced to march north to San Fernando, where they were transferred to a prison camp. Shrum survived backbreaking work building a



Shrum's Bataan map

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road through the jungle for the Japanese.

In September 1944, Shrum was shipped to a prison near Osaka, Japan, where he worked in a factory for a year until gaining his freedom with the war's end.

The oldest of six children, Shrum decided to become an architect after returning stateside. He relished the way architecture combined the precision of mathematics and engineering with the creative aspects of art, enrolling at what is now Carnegie Mellon University, in Pittsburgh, immediately upon returning from his honeymoon.

He'd gotten lucky at a nearby

men's clothing store, where he found a tie, and a wife as well. Shirley Ann Larimer worked there and recognized Shrum from the newspaper as a local war hero. They married in 1948 and raised their children in south Florida, where they stayed until 1995, when they moved to Cary to be near two of their four daughters.

For 50 years, Shrum designed churches, banks, hospitals and public safety buildings. But in the early 1980s, he received an unusual commission. The Filipino government asked him to design the Cabanatuan American Memorial, dedicated to the Filipino and American soldiers who died during the Death March and while imprisoned at Camp Cabanatuan in the Philippines. The camp was the site of a daring January 1945 rescue by U.S. Army Rangers and Filipino guerrillas to free more than 500 prisoners facing probable execution. He and his wife traveled there in 1982 as guests of the government.

Though architecture was his day job, Shrum spent countless hours educating civic groups and schoolchildren. He liked the children best because they asked the best questions. Adults would feel inhibited out of respect. But children asked about what was on their mind: "Did you really eat grasshoppers? How did you fix them? Did they make you sick?"

Shrum survived his imprisonment, in part, by volunteering for any duty. When the Japanese soldiers needed someone to cook rice, he took the job — and nabbed extra rice rations for his unit. When they needed a barber, he said he could cut hair.

"He would volunteer for whatever job came along, because it meant he might be able to keep himself and his friends alive just a little bit longer," said his oldest daughter, Deborah Shrum Brown.

Mess-kit memorial

His nightly commitment to chronicling the steps of the Death March on his aluminum mess kit also helped him endure.

On the outside, Shrum carved two American flags, an eagle and his squadron logo. On the inside, he scratched out a map of Bataan and Corregidor that depicted the Death March route and the location of prison camps. Each evening, he worked at it. It took him one year to complete.

Now, the Smithsonian has come calling.

About a year ago, Beverly Shrum Dale, one of Shrum's daughters, wrote to President Bush, Vice President Cheney and the Smithsonian asking whether the government would be interested in displaying the mess kit.

Yes, was the response.

Come springtime, Dale will deliver it in person.

"I don't feel comfortable sending it FedEx, so when we take Dad's ashes to Arlington, I will personally bring it to the Smithsonian," Dale said.

This Saturday, two of Shrum's daughters plan to attend the 8th of November Concert Celebration at Cary's Koka Booth Amphitheatre in honor of Veteran's Day.

The 82nd Airborne's All American Chorus will perform; so will Billy Ray Cyrus. An original painting by artist Craig Bone will be unveiled. The artwork was inspired by a battle Nov. 8, 1965, during Operation Hump in Vietnam.

Robert Shrum is still on the concert's Web site as the recipient of the Bataan Death March Prisoner of War Medal, created in 1985 in honor of the march's survivors.

The award will now be given posthumously.

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Robert Shrum is survived by four daughters and seven grandchildren.

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*You can learn more
about the Nov. 8 concert
and the Bataan Death March
at <http://tinyurl.com/5is8kb>.*