# *Walter Zergman*

# Bataan Death March survivor: ‘You just had to have the will to live,’ Sequim man says.

Bill Scott didn’t know what to make of his Uncle Wally. The guy would tell dirty jokes that embarrassed Scott’s mother, and was otherwise “not pleasant.” Then one day about 15 years ago, Scott, then in his 30s, turned to his uncle with a question. What happened to you, Scott asked, when you were in the Philippines?

“He said, ‘Are you serious? Do you really want to know?'” Scott remembered.

When he said yes, Walter Zergman of Sequim told him, in a matter-of-fact tone, that he had survived the Bataan Death March of May 1942. The march, later accounted as a Japanese war crime, was a 61-mile trek to a prison camp where Zergman was to spend 3 ½years. The Japanese Army had defeated the Allied forces in the three-month Battle of Bataan and forced some 76,000 Filipino and American troops to walk, with little food and less water, to prison camps in the province of Tarlac.

On the march through deep dust and tropical heat, Japanese soldiers killed hundreds of their prisoners, withholding water, slitting their throats with bayonets, beheading them and leaving the bodies in the road alongside those begging for help. Zergman, then a 22-year-old kid from Milwaukee, kept going, even as his comrades died all around him. He was among the 54,000 who made it to another kind of hell.

As a prisoner of war, he watched his fellow soldiers succumb to beriberi, malaria, dysentery and starvation.

How did he survive, when so many others could not?

“You just had to have the will to live,” said Zergman, who will be 90 in February.

“I was lucky,” he added, “that I only got one sickness at a time.”

Other guys, beaten down by malnutrition and abuse, contracted one deadly illness and then another. While at the camp Zergman was made to work in coal mines, which periodically caved in, killing prisoners.

“Each shift, we’d lose about six or 10 men,” Zergman recalled.

Food was scarce at the camp, and Zergman’s weight fell to 68 pounds. He had his arm broke for food.

At that point, “I knew I didn’t have much time. So I got two of my buddies to break my arm,” he said.

“That took me out of the coal mines. I ended up on the rock pile, where they had brought in bricks from bombed buildings. They gave us a pick, and we chipped the mortar off so the bricks could be reused.

“And they made us carry the dead out every morning. As we dragged the bodies out, we tore the numbers off their uniforms,” and then used those numbers to go through the chow line a second time. With an extra ball of rice and a fish head from those second trips, Zergman, who is 5-feet-10-inches tall, got his weight up over 90 pounds.

Deliverance came in August 1945. The United States dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan, pushing the Japanese to surrender. Allied soldiers liberated the prison camps, and Zergman was taken to the U.S. Naval Hospital in Long Beach, Calif. In late 1945 received a letter from President Harry S. Truman, which he keeps in a frame beside two presidential citations, the Bronze Star and nine other medals.

“It gives me special pleasure to welcome you back to your native shores, and to express on behalf of the people of the United States the joy we feel,” Truman wrote.

“You have fought valiantly and you have suffered greatly. As your Commander in Chief, I take pride in your past achievements and express the thanks of a grateful nation for your services in combat and your steadfastness while a prisoner of war. May God grant you happiness and a successful future.”

In October 1945, Zergman married his sweetheart, June, who had waited for him back in the States.

After serving 20 years in the Navy, Zergman went to work for an infrared optics company in California’s San Fernando Valley. HrRetired to Sequim. In 1980 he and June retired to Sequim, near where their daughter, Pat Miller, lives in Port Angeles. They were together for nearly 60 years until June’s death in 2005.

Coming out of the POW camp alive, Zergman said, changed the way he experienced everyday life.

“You appreciate the little things that people take for granted,” he said, “like just going to work, exercising . . . the freedom you have.” Zergman said he’s been treated well as a veteran; he used to attend prisoner-of-war reunions, but nearly all of the men who served with him in Asia have died.

Yet to Scott, an architect who lives in the Seattle suburb of Kenmore, Uncle Wally continues to be an inspiration.

“My view of him changed,” after Zergman told the story of Bataan. “It’s amazing this guy can even tell jokes.”

He had certain mental characteristics, Scott said, that kept him alive. ‘He was courageous’ “He had persistence . . . whatever came his way he had the belief he could overcome it. He wasn’t a whiner. And he took risks. He was courageous,” and despite the despair surrounding him, Zergman somehow found things to joke about. “He never lost his sense of humor,” off-color as it often was, Scott said. Scott laughed a little when he recalled recently reading a book about a man who proudly called himself a “survivor” of the latest stock-market crash and economic downturn.

“You want to talk about somebody who survived something, talk to my uncle,” he said.

“I think his story could benefit a lot of people . . . These guys were heroes. “I hope they are not forgotten.”

*Credit: by* [*Diane Urbani de la Paz*](https://www.peninsuladailynews.com/author/diane-urbani-de-la-paz/) */ November 11, 2009 / peninsuladailynews.com*

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***Note:***Zergman was a sailor on the USS Canopus - Submarine Squadron 2. The Canopus was on Bataan. They were part of the Combat Area Service Unit, under Gen. McBride at first, then Gen. Selleck, and then Gen. Pierce. The CASU was made up of sailors, a few marines, men from the pursuit squadrons, elements of the Phil Army 51st and 71st Division, and two Phil Constabulary Units. Their mission was to guard the southwestern coast of Bataan in case the Nips attempted an amphibious landing. In late January, 1942, this amphibious landing did happen and a series of battles ensued, "The Battle of the Points." The Canopus men participated in these battles and held back the Japs long enough for the Phil Scouts unit to arrive to finish the fight.

Sometime before the fall of Bataan, all the sailors from the Canopus, Battery E and G of the 60th CAC, and almost all the marines were evacuated and sent to Corregidor. There they formed part of the 4th Marines 3rd Battalion, which was composed of 4th Marine Companies, the 4th Marine Band, Cavite Marines, sailors from the Canopus, the 10th Patrol Wing, sailors from Cavite, and men from Bataan (both American and Filipino) who escaped who were healthy enough to fight. They were put on Beach Defense.

Of course I may be wrong, there is a very slim possibility, and for some reason, Zergman stayed behind and was caught up on the Death March, but it is highly improbable and would not make any sense at all. No other accounts, affidavits or statements attest to anyone being left behind.

**Excerpt from USS Canopus History:**

The ship was scuttled the morning of April 9, 1941, and the last of the crew along with all Naval personnel on Bataan, was taken to Corregidor for duty in the 4th Battalion Reserve, of the 4th Marine Regiment, the defenders of Corregidor’s beaches. This group bivouaced on Geary Trail in Government Ravine for nearly one month before being called upon for the last counterattack.

Around midnight on May 5, 1942, this group of 500 sailors (not all from Canopus) moved into Malinta Tunnel in preparation for the final   
counterattack against advancing Japanese troops. Paul Shealy was likely captured on May 6, 1942, and held with the Corregidor garrison on the old seaplane ramp for nearly 3 weeks of starvation before being taken into Manila and old Bilibid Prison, then moved to one of the three hell-hole Cabanatuan POW Camps north on Luzon.

As the Canopus was *on* Bataan, it is understandable that many believe the men were on the Bataan Death March