Upstate legend’s life a rendezvous with history

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His life and character reflect much of the long history he’s known. Turning 100 years old on July 14, the former Japanese prisoner of war in World War II is a larger-than-life legend. Recently CBS television’s “60 Minutes” presented his remarkable story to a nationwide audience. He’s intensely proud of his birth on the anniversary of Bastille Day, the symbolic opening in 1789 of the French Revolution that helped affirm — along with the American Revolution of 1776 — the modern ideals of human rights and equality.

Beverly N. “Ben” Skardon, a 1938 graduate of then Clemson College, joined a year later the U.S. Army. In December 1941, when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor and America entered the war, he was in the Philippines commanding a company of Filipino army recruits. On April 9, 1942, he and tens of thousands of other U.S. and Filipino troops fighting the Japanese army on the Bataan peninsula surrendered to the enemy.

The Japanese forced the prisoners, including Skardon, on a terrible death march in which thousands of the captives died or were slaughtered. He managed to survive the Bataan ordeal.

He spent three years in Japanese prison camps, suffering acutely from diseases, infection, hunger, and torture by guards. For a time, he had two other Clemson officers, Henry Leitner and Otis Morgan, imprisoned with him. They carried him to latrines and cleaned him. Eventually they traded Skardon’s
Clemson class ring for food.

At the end of 1944, the Japanese evacuated him to Japan. He survived the sinking of two Japanese transport ships carrying him and hundreds of other prisoners. In August 1945, the Soviet army liberated him from a prison camp in Manchuria. Sadly, the Clemson officers who helped to save his life died during the imprisonment. Skardon has never forgotten them.

With his wartime experience, he could write his own version of Unbroken, a best-selling 2010 book and movie about another American who survived Japanese imprisonment. Why, pushed to the limits of his life, had Skardon not “broken?” He’s explained often how his Episcopal priest father taught him the virtues of faith, honor, and sacrifice.

He remained in the Army — serving in Korea (1951-52) — until 1962, leaving with the rank of colonel. He then earned a graduate degree, and from 1964 until his retirement in 1983 taught in Clemson University’s English department. Not only did he communicate to students his love of literature, but also, as many remember about him, his deep affection for them and for life in general. James Barker, a former student and later Clemson’s 14th president, said of Skardon: “Ben endured unspeakable hardships. . . . Yet he chose to live the rest of his life without bitterness. He chose to remember the love and support and sacrifice of his fellow prisoners.”

In 1977, Skardon received the university’s Alumni Master Teacher Award and in 2002 the school’s Alumni Distinguished Service Award.

In retirement, he continues to encounter often the history he’d lived.

For years, at the university’s annual ring ceremonies, during which seniors received their class rings, he described how his
ring helped save his life and how adversity shaped his character. In 2013 the university established the Skardon Clemson Ring Endowment.

In April 2010, he participated in the school’s dedication of its Scroll of Honor, a memorial across the street from Memorial Stadium honoring the 493 Clemson alumni who gave the ultimate sacrifice in nine wars and campaigns. Inscribed at the entrance to the adjacent Memorial Park, Skardon’s words remember those “who lived and served and died so that we might live and serve.” Also the stadium’s flagpole, which flies the US flag he so reveres, is dedicated to him.

The past spring, accompanied by friends calling themselves “Ben’s Brigade,” the near-centenarian walked eight miles in the annual Bataan Memorial Death March in New Mexico, for the 10th time, to remember the thousands of lives lost in the 1942 atrocity.

Skardon’s eldest daughter, Sara, observes about him, “He’s always said family first and keep the faith. ... All for one and one for all.” Today, his warm and infectious smile, deep and resonating voice, unselfish compassion for others, and love of the Clemson Tigers inspire everyone still fortunate enough to meet him.

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