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NEWS RELEASE

Oct. 7, 2009

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BATAAN MARCH SURVIVOR, ARTIST TO SPEAK AT UM OCT. 20

MISSOULA —

When Ben Steele volunteered in 1940 for the Army Air Corps, he didn't know that he was destined to spend 1,244 days as a prisoner of war.

Steele, who was born and raised in **Roundup**, was at Clark Field on the Philippine island of Luzon serving as a dispatcher and on the ground crew on Dec. 7, 1941, when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. After the 99-day battle for Bataan that ended April 9, 1942, he became one of more than 76,000 sick and starving prisoners of the Japanese who underwent the grueling 66-mile Bataan Death March.

Steele, the protagonist of the book "Tears in the Darkness: The Story of the Bataan Death March and Its Aftermath," will talk about his time as a World War II POW and his art depicting the experience at 5 p.m. Tuesday, Oct. 20, at Fact & Fiction in The Bookstore at UM in the University Center. The presentation, hosted by the Montana Museum of Art & Culture, is free and open to the public. Free parking will be available after 5 p.m. in lots near the University Center.

"Tears in the Darkness," a New York Times best-seller, was written by Michael and Elizabeth M. Norman and features art by Steele. The book was published this year by Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

During World War II, Steele was destined to become part of what many consider the single largest defeat in United States military history. The Bataan experience took him from the O'Donnell POW camp to laboring on Tayabas Road, to Bilibid Prison in Manila, and then to a "hell ship" that transported POWs in unventilated cargo holds to work as slaves in various defense industries in Japan. By 1945, Steele was forced to work 12-hour shifts underground in the coal-mining settlement of Camp Omine Machi. On the morning of Aug. 6 that year, he and the other workers heard a great blast and felt the rumble of the first atomic bomb that exploded over Hiroshima, 55 miles away.

Near death and suffering from malaria, blood poisoning, beriberi, dysentery and jaundice, Steele spent some time in Bilibid Prison in Manila, where a group of POW Navy doctors had set up a makeshift hospital. He was so ill that priests actually performed last rites – twice.

After more than a month staring at the hospital's ceiling and walls, Steele knew he had to do something. He dragged himself across the floor to the ashes of a cook fire, pulled out a stick and scratched lines on the hospital's gray concrete floor. Through his interest in drawing as a young boy and a little help from an engineer officer at the hospital, Steele's scratches eventually became drawings of horses, cows, sheep and buildings from his time growing up on a Montana ranch. Those drawings were the beginning of the artist's journey that led him to document the horrors of the experiences of World War II POWs.

Steele's original sketches were lost at sea, but when he came home to Montana after the war, he began to reproduce them from memory. He graduated from the Cleveland Institute of Art and completed teaching credentials at Kent State University. In 1955, Steele received a master's degree in art from the University of Denver. He taught art for many years at Eastern Montana College, now Montana State University-**Billings**, where he is a professor emeritus.

At age 91, Steele continues to sketch daily in a studio at his home in Billings, where he lives with his wife, Shirley. Most of his sketchbooks are bound and stashed in closets – more than 30 volumes that date from his first days in art school.

For him, he said, art is great therapy.

More information about Steele's UM presentation is available by calling MMAC at 406-243-2019 and on the museum's Web site at <http://www.umt.edu/montanamuseum>.

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