

WWII Prisoner of War Survivor and Benson Catholic, Paul Kerchum, laid to rest on his 103rd birthday

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By Carissa Krautscheid

Devout Catholic, Paul Kerchum, was laid to rest on his 103rd birthday in Benson, AZ. Kerchum was not just a local hero, he was also recognized nationally as one of the U.S. Air Force’s most legendary, courageous, and inspirational Airmen and an American hero.

“In January 1938, I joined the Army,” said Kerchum in a speech he delivered to his Knights of Columbus Council six years ago. Serving in World War II, he “was caught up in the invasion of the Philippines by the Japanese” in 1941.

In April 1942, Kerchum was one of the 75,000 American and Filipino soldiers who were forced to march for 6 days to a prison camp 65 miles away, in what became known as the Bataan Death March, “one of the worst atrocities in modern wartime history” ([**U.S. Army**](https://www.army.mil/asianpacificamericans/bataandeathmarch.html)). Severe physical abuse, starvation, and wanton killing brought about the deaths of an estimated 7,000 to 10,000 men.

But for Kerchum and 60,000 other survivors of the Bataan Death March, arriving at their destination brought no relief. In a camp made for 10,000 prisoners, conditions were deadly for the multitudes who were forced to suffer or be killed by disease, starvation, extreme heat, and violence. In 1944, American soldiers were forced into slave labor at factories and coal mines. "I spent the last year of the war,” recalled Kerchum, “working in a lead mine, Mitsubishi Mine #11 in Northern Japan.”

“What was on his mind was his survival,” said Deacon Rick Valencia from Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Church in Benson. “Paul was a strong man, mentally and physically. That was the only way you could survive, he told us. Paul was aware of his surroundings, assessing what it would take to survive. The mental toughness and fortitude that the survivors possessed is second to no one. A lot of it was his own inner strength. Paul endured pain and suffering beyond what anyone could ever imagine. Inner strength, fortitude, and sheer will to survive carried him through.”

Paul Kerchum survived three and a half years as a Prisoner of War.

After World War II, Paul met his wife, Gloria. “When Gloria and I married,” Kerchum told the [**Knights of Columbus**](https://www.kofc.org/en/news-room/columbia/2021/november/service-and-sacrifice.html), “she put me on the right road. Because I’ll admit, I was not much of a Catholic at that time. I remember one day I started talking about somebody and she yelled at me, ‘Cállate la boca!’ (‘Shut up!’). Then she said, ‘Paul, one of the biggest sins is gossiping. And if you want to go to heaven, you better quit.’”

Kerchum chose to continue serving in the Armed Forces for 21 additional years, including during the Korean War. Despite the horror and inhumanity he and countless others experienced at the hands of the Japanese, he chose to return to serve in Japan.

“Everybody used to ask me, ‘Why did you go back to Japan?’” Kerchum recalled. “Because I was a Prisoner of War, I had an option not to go. But I told them, ‘I *want* to go there.’ Gloria and I talked all about it, and I talked to a lot of the Japanese people. And in my heart, I forgave them. That was how Gloria influenced me. We were married for 74 years.”

Perhaps most notable of all Kerchum’s accomplishments and contributions is his lived example of radical forgiveness.

As Catholics, we are familiar with Jesus’ own radical forgiveness and his commission for us to do the same. “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your heavenly Father” (Matthew 5:43-45).

Years later, Paul “retired in 1966 as a Chief Master Sargent with 29 years of military service, 8 years of Infantry and 21 years in the Air Force,” he said.

The Kerchums moved to Benson, Arizona, where they lived for the rest of their lives. As devout Catholics and active parishioners of Our Lady of Lourdes Parish, Paul and Gloria attended Mass every Saturday evening and sat in the same pew every time.

Paul started a successful real estate business, played golf every Tuesday well into his 90s, equipped local baseball teams, and actively participated in the Fourth Degree of the Knights of Columbus Council #7521 where he “held many officer roles, including Grand Knight,” Kerchum told the [**Knights of Columbus**](https://www.kofc.org/en/news-room/columbia/2021/november/service-and-sacrifice.html). “When I joined the Knights, I *really joined*, I really became involved. It was the camaraderie of it. They were a good group, and they were *for* something. You could find me anytime on Friday or Saturday morning in front of the grocery store or post office raising funds for charity. I raised a lot of money, and I really liked what I was doing. So, to all Catholic men, I say: join the Knights of Columbus. And if you join, try to be active.”

Kerchum is remembered for his generosity. “He was a very giving man,” said Deacon Rick. “There was never a time I can remember him not stepping up and giving what ever he could, whether it was his time or money. Paul was quite involved in the community.”

For many years, Kerchum served on the board for the Annual Bishop’s Appeal, what is now the Catholic Foundation’s Annual Catholic Appeal. He worked with Bishop Moreno and Bishop Kicanas for many years. “Paul was very giving of his time!” said Deacon Rick. “He never said no. You could always count on him. Paul Kerchum was a good man to emulate for following the Gospels.”

Kerchum “devoted numerous hours to community service and public speaking” ([**U.S. Air Force**](https://www.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/3277537/famed-airman-cmsgt-paul-kerchum-laid-to-rest-with-full-military-honors/)). As perhaps the last known survivor of the Bataan Death March, Kerchum often attended the [**Bataan Memorial Death March**](https://bataanmarch.com/) at the White Sands Missile Range in New Mexico.

“Perhaps the greatest personal giving of himself,” Deacon Rick said, “was when he spoke to students and organizations about his experience in the Bataan Death March. That was really significant. He would do this all from memory! It was ingrained in his mind; he would recount everything and do it in such a way that he brought to life his experiences of his captivity and the march."

“He’s going to be sorely missed,” said Deacon Rick. “Paul Kerchum was just an amazing man, truly a hero.”

Photo by the Knights of Columbus