

'We Will Consistently Remind Ourselves of this Hero'

A VFW Post in Arizona worked with its city to honor the memory of the last surviving member of the infamous Bataan Death March by renaming its municipal airport in his honor

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More than a year after the Bataan Death March's last remaining World War II survivor passed away, the city he called home for more than 56 years renamed its municipal airport after him.

Led by VFW Post 6271 in Benson, Arizona, more than 300 attendees gathered outside of the newly named Benson Municipal Airport/Paul Kerchum Field to honor the memory of Benson's own American hero on Jan. 27.

In a ceremony that included 14 members of the Kerchum family, as well as dignitaries from across the Grand Canyon State and the VFW Department of Arizona, many spoke of the larger-than-life Kerchum, who died just shy of his 103rd birthday on Dec. 17, 2022.

"Just over a year ago, we simultaneously mourned the loss of and celebrated the life of our own hometown hero," Benson Mayor Joe Konrad said in the opening speech. "He shared his story with us every Memorial and Veterans Day, and in spite of the atrocities that he endured, Paul Kerchum rose above adversity, persevered and spent a lifetime making this world a better place."

A life member of Post 6271, Kerchum's intimate account as a POW and survivor of the infamous Bataan Death March was well-known among his fellow VFW members. Many of these veterans said they often walked away with a new perspective on their own service.

For Post 6271 Judge Advocate and District 7 Commander Dennis Bringham, who spearheaded the ceremony on Jan. 27, what most stood out about Kerchum was the kind of

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survivor he was.

“By human nature we are all survivors, but it is how we accomplish this that sets us all apart,” Bringham said. “His upbeat attitude and demeanor is one of the things that made him unique as a survivor. He had every reason and right to be a bitter and angry person, but he was not.”

Wishing to have known him longer, Bringham’s speech carried the themes that appeared throughout the rest of the speeches from several other keynote speakers that included Air Force Col. Scott Mills from Davis Monthan Air Force Base in Arizona, as well as Army Col. John Ives, a garrison commander at Fort Huachuca in Arizona.

When speaking of Kerchum, who retired after 29 years in the Air Force with the rank of chief master sergeant, Mills added perspective to the importance of the renamed Benson Municipal Airport/Paul Kerchum Field.

“In renaming this airport, we give it a profound sense of symbolism, symbolism that will echo far beyond this runway,” Mills said. “This name not only commemorates Chief Kerchum, but it commemorates all of the collective strength of those who have served, and those who are still serving today.”

Mills’ speech segued into Ives’ remembrance of Kerchum, whose speech at New Mexico State University in 1997 resonated with cadet Ives before he himself would embark on his own military journey.

“I was blessed to hear him speak at New Mexico State University when we called ourselves the Bataan Battalion,” Mills recalled. “He and two other veterans spoke on the terrors of those days and imparted lasting messages of hope, toughness and glorious victory.”

Mills then reflected on what that speech means today now that he is older and wiser, having experienced deployments to Iraq, Afghanistan, Kuwait, Qatar, Korea and Nigeria.

“Now that I am older, his willingness to share his experiences served a deeper meaning, his presence served as an inspiration and now his departure serves as a cold reminder that the greatest among all of us must pass,”

Mills said. “And, so, we will consistently remind ourselves of this hero by naming this airport after this great man, Chief Master Sgt. Paul Kerchum.”

Following Mills, the event concluded with some recollections by members of the Kerchum family, who spoke of Kerchum, the family man. From talking about his early life during the Great Depression to his fooling his mother into signing a permission slip to join the Army in 1938, the stories of young Kerchum and later the father and grandfather flowed.

At the conclusion of the ceremony, the monument bearing the biography and namesake of the Benson airport was unveiled, and the guests were encouraged to attend a reception with food and drinks at Post 6271, where the dining facility was first renamed the Paul Kerchum Hall on Memorial Day 2023.

This article is featured in the 2024 April issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Ismael Rodriguez Jr.](#), senior writer for VFW magazine.