

MEDIA RELEASE

October 8, 2010

Contact: Julie Dial, Executive Director, Western Heritage Center, jdial@ywhc.org, 406.690.4994 or Barbara Koostra, Director, Montana Museum of Art & Culture, Barbara.koostra@mso.umt.edu, 406.243.2019 or

Please join a statewide celebration of artist Ben Steele's life and work on the occasion of his 93rd birthday, November 17, 2010.

Steele, a Montana native, was a World War II Bataan Death March participant and Japanese prisoner of war. Steele created oil paintings and drawings that chronicle the Japanese bombing of Clark Field in the Philippines after the attack on Pearl Harbor; the capture of more than 76,000 Allied POWs in the Philippines; the infamous Bataan Death March and Steele's experiences as a Japanese prisoner of war in the Philippines and Japan. Steele's story was recently featured in *Tears in the Darkness*, a 2009 *New York Times* bestseller written by Michael Norman and Elizabeth M. Norman.

In September, 2010, the Montana Museum of Art and Culture (MMAC) announced Steele's gift of 11 original oil paintings and 78 drawings to The University of Montana-based art museum. "Ben is a treasure," said Barbara Koostra, MMAC Director. "We are thrilled that his POW artworks have become part of the MMAC Permanent Collection. His message is one of peace and hope and people will learn a great deal about the lessons of war from his important, powerful art."

The Montana Museum of Art and Culture, the Schoolhouse History and Art Center of Colstrip and Western Heritage Center (WHC) of Billings are honoring Steele with displays of his World War II paintings and drawings.

Steele's life and work will be celebrated at 12:15pm on Wednesday, November 17, 2010 at the Western Heritage Center with a Montana National Guard Honor Guard and the presentation of a flag from the State Capitol. Lieutenant Governor Bohlinger will be on hand. After the brief ceremony, Steele will recount his incredible journey of survival and the museum will host an open house to celebrate Ben's 93rd birthday. Shirley, his wife of 59 years, and many friends will be there to honor him for his service to our country. The WHC is privileged to have hosted several shows of Ben's art and he has given presentations at the museum many times. "We are inspired by Ben's ability to endure the worst and come out of those experiences with such a gracious and positive spirit," said Julie Dial, museum director. "Please join us for birthday cake, great conversation and good cheer," said Dial.

- Program and Exhibit at the Western Heritage Center, Billings Wednesday, November 17, 12:00pm-2:30pm
- Exhibit by MMAC at The University of Montana, Main Hall Lobby, Missoula
- Exhibit by the Schoolhouse History and Art Center, Colstrip