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## A musical tribute

### Smithfield composer's tribute to Bataan survivors expresses his gratitude to WWII veterans

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#### SMITHFIELD

In Stephen Melillo's mind, the most important thing was to get it done right and to get it done quickly.

A group in New Mexico had commissioned him to compose a piece of music honoring the American survivors of the Bataan Death March. Melillo, a Smithfield resident and a fanatical history buff, knew that the men who called themselves "the battling bastards of Bataan" were now in their 80s. He was determined to complete his composition so that as many of the survivors as possible could experience it.

But it was more important to get it right. So when the group told him that they wanted about

eight minutes of music, Melillo insisted that wasn't enough. It's all we can afford, they told him.

"Finally," Melillo says, "I told them that we couldn't let another one of these men die without this being done for them. I was born to write this piece of music for these men, but there's no way to do it in eight minutes. No way. So I told them, 'You pay me for a 6- to 8-minute piece, and let me write what I know these men need and deserve.'"

The completed work was a 65-minute opus for an orchestra and choir, with a soundtrack that also includes archival radio broadcasts and other historical audio recordings. It received its theatrical premiere last spring in New Mexico, with a half-dozen Bataan survivors in the audience.

The composition took on a new life — a historically signifi-

cant one — in the past two weeks, when Melillo conducted a Japanese military band's recording of the work.

Melillo, 47, worked almost as hard to arrange this recording as he did on the composition itself. Col. Junichiro Eguchi, commander of the Tokyo Kosei wind orchestra, initially balked at the request when he learned the theme of the composition.

"He told me that what we call 'The Bataan Death March' was seen as an important mission to the Japanese imperial army," Melillo says. "At one point, he asked me if a U.S. military band would play a song written by a Japanese composer about Hiroshima."

The two men e-mailed back and forth for three months. Melillo still has the notes. "I consider them a part of history," he says. Finally, Melillo insisted that Eguchi listen once again to two of his previous compositions — "Musashi" and "Jidai," both of which are rooted in Japanese history.

"Could a person who is anti-Japanese write those pieces of music?" he asked.

They began to reach a compromise. Eguchi did not like the original title, "Beyond Courage," because it was taken from an American book about The Bataan Death March. Melillo changed the title to "Kakehashi," a Japanese reference signifying "a bridge to the future." He subtitled the work "That We Might Live," and he was impressed when his interpreter recognized it as a paraphrase from Lincoln's Gettysburg Address.

Finally — "to show my heart and my intentions," Melillo says — he noted that both the Japanese and American soldiers were fighting for their homelands and yearning to return to their families. He asked Eguchi to suggest a piece of traditional Japanese music on that theme. The original composition ended with "God Bless America" and "The Star-Spangled Banner." To make the work more universal, "God Bless America" is now followed by "Furasato," a Japanese children's song about the love of homeland.

Eguchi was convinced. The recording, which will include choirs from Old Dominion and

Shenandoah universities, will be the first ever by this military band to be released outside of Japan. Melillo — whose son Spencer was born on the fateful morning of Sept. 11, 2001 — plans to release the CD on that date this year.

Melillo, a New York native who moved to Virginia in 1995, views the composition as a mission, and he relates the story with a dramatic flair. At times, as he prepares to answer a question, he puts his fingertips to his forehead as though trying to find a way to keep up with the thoughts racing through his mind.

"I've interviewed and met enough (World War II veterans) that I can just recognize them now," he says. "I'll see a gentleman in the supermarket or in the mall and I'll just know. I'll talk to them, ask if they were in World War II and I'll tell them, 'I just wanted to make sure you get a copy of the CD.'"

"These men are heroes, all of them. And they're still with us. That's why I needed to write this

Please see **COMPOSER/G3**



In April 1942, about 10,000 starving American POWs were forced to march across the Philippine island of Bataan. About 650 died along the way. Six decades later, Smithfield resident Stephen Melillo sat down to compose a musical work that would honor the survivors of what is now known as The Bataan Death March, pictured below.



## A bridge to the future



Stephen Melillo wrote a 65-minute opus honoring the men who survived The Bataan Death March during WWII. PHOTO BY BUDDY NORRIS/DAILY PRESS

SUNDAY, MAY 22, 2005 | G3

TICKET

► **COMPOSER** Continued from G2

## Honoring WWII soldiers is music to his ears

piece. I see it as passing on the sword Excalibur. We cannot let these guys go. We need to meet these men, shake their hands now. Then when we touch our children, and our children's children, we'll be passing it along."

Melillo began the composition in April 2003 and completed it even as he rebuilt much of his Sterling Point home after it was damaged by Hurricane Isabel. When there was no local choir available for the premiere performance in New Mexico last spring, Melillo paid to bus in 35 members of the Shenandoah University choir — he won't say how much it cost, but he acknowledges it was significantly more than he was paid to compose the music. But it was worth it to him.

On the computer desk where he writes his music, Melillo has posted a quote from Gustav Mahler: "If a composer could say what he had to say in words, he would not bother trying to say it in music." Melillo believes that theory with all his heart.

Like a psychiatrist trying to take a patient back in time to a moment of conflict, he wants his composition to take veterans back to World War II. On the night of the premiere, when a white flag was raised on stage as the music recalled the surrender, the audience fell silent. "At that point," Melillo says, "those men were *there*."

After that performance, Bataan survivor Jack Aldrich

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my grandson."*



approached Melillo. When Melillo first interviewed him in preparation for the piece, Aldrich had told him it would be impossible to tell this story in music. After the premiere, he admitted that the composer had accomplished his goal. In appreciation, Aldrich took off his lapel pin — the pin from his Army regiment — and gave it to Melillo, telling him, "From this day forward, you are my grandson."

That sense of connection is central to Melillo's thinking. When he talks about the American college students who will sing on the recording, he says he will tell them: "What you took part in today, you took part in so that 50 years from now you could tell your children about it. Keep that sword Excalibur moving into the future." ■

### The Bataan Death March

On April 10, 1942, the Japanese military held about 70,000 prisoners of war on the Philippine island of Bataan — mostly Filipino, but including around 10,000 Americans. Gen. Masaharu Homma ordered the starving, diseased prisoners to be marched for most of the 100 miles to the POW camp where they would be held. An estimated 10,000 died along the way, including about 650 Americans. As of a year ago, Stars & Stripes estimated that fewer than 200 Bataan survivors were still alive in the U.S. ■