REMEMBERING CHARLES GUGGENHEIM

Mr. HOLLINGS. Mr. President. Let me first ask unanimous consent to have printed in the RECORD "The Filmmaker Who Told America's Story" by Phil McCombs that appeared in the Washington Post last week.

There being no objection, the material was ordered to be printed in the RECORD, as follows:

[Washington Post, Oct. 10, 2002]

THE FILMMAKER WHO TOLD AMERICA'S STORY

(By Phil McCombs)

He raced against death, and won.

Oh, how Charles Guggenheim would have not liked putting it so directly!

The great film documentarian, who died at Georgetown University Hospital yesterday of pancreatic cancer at 78, left a life's work of subtle, passionate cinematic hymns to what he called, in a last message to friends, "the essential American journey."

His final film, finished just weeks ago, limns a shocking episode of that journey—the "selection" by Nazis of 350 U.S. troops captured in the Battle of the Bulge in 1944 for deportation to a concentration camp because they were Jews or "looked Jewish."

Guggenheim, the son of a well-to-do German Jewish furniture merchant in Cincinnati, easily might have been one of them. His unit was decimated in the battle, but he'd been left behind in the States with a life-threatening infection.

For more than half a century, as hints and incomplete versions of the story surfaced, it gnawed at him. A few years ago, he began searching for survivors—and found them.

Early this year, just as Guggenheim was working on the "death march" sequence, his cancer was diagnosed.

For the next six months, he'd work all week on the film, have chemotherapy on Friday, sleep through the weekend and be back on the job Monday.

A few weeks ago, as he and his daughter, Grace—producer of this and many of his films—were "mixing" the final version, he began suffering painful attacks. The cancer had invaded his stomach.

"He'd have to lie on the couch while we worked," Grace Guggenheim recalled.

By then, her father was thin and drawn—not unlike his former comrades after they were liberated by U.S. forces following months of slave labor in a satellite camp of Buchenwald.

"Does it occur to you," Guggenheim's old friend, historian David McCullough, asked

him in an interview last month, "that maybe you were spared to make this film?"

"Well," Guggenheim answered, "I felt a deep obligation more after I met the [survivors] than I did before. . . . I said, 'I owe them something.'" Thoughts of his old comrades courage, he added, were a "source of strength for me" as he persevered in his battle with cancer to finish the film.

Just as "Berga: Soldiers of Another War" was done, Guggenheim's strength evaporated. He began staying home, sleeping most of the time as his wife, Marion—his steadfast supporter for half a century—tended to him.

When I visited a few days after McCullough, Guggenheim was weak but still very much himself—that enormous charm, the bright sense of humor, that smile of his that sparkled like the sun.

He worried that "Berga" was being discussed in the media too soon, since it's not due for release until next April. But he was sure of one thing.

"This film will hit you right in the gut."

STARRING EVERYDAY PEOPLE

Guggenheim was a giant.

In a career that spanned almost six decades, he received 12 Academy Award nominations and four Oscars for his documentaries—a feat matched only by Walt Disney.

Yet acclaim never sullied this modest, friendly man who lived a quiet family life in Washington. Though many of his friends were powerful figures, "he can sort of take it or leave it," as former Missouri representative Jim Symington once said. "He's an artist."

Understatement was Guggenheim's signature—but it mounts in his films until, often, you can't help but cry.

In "The Shadow of Hate" (1995), his wrenching study of bigotry, a dead African American male is shown, hanging from a branch, in a long-faded archival photo.

Guggenheim's camera pans the white crowd, posing under the lynching tree; stops at a little girl in a pretty dress; slowly zooms in.

She has a shy smile.

Yet his outrage at injustice ("Nine From Little Rock," on the 1957 school integration crisis; "The Johnstown Flood," about neglect of a dam by wealthy industrialists that led to 2,200 deaths in 1889; and "A Time for Justice," on the civil rights movement, all won Academy Awards) merely underscored his fierce love of America.

"The truth is, we're living in wonderful times and a wonderful place," he once told a filmmakers' organization that had given him an award. "This country provides more possibility to learn about oneself, and what the journey of humanity has been, than any other place.

"There are great stories in what is very common."

He crafted celebratory documentaries on presidents Truman, Kennedy and Johnson; on U.S. fighting men in the Normandy invasion ("D-Day Remembered"); on workers constructing iconic American symbols ("Monument to the Dream," on the building of the 660-foot Gateway Arch in St. Louis, "The Making of Liberty," on refurbishing the Statue of Liberty); on the immigrants who passed through Ellis Island ("Island of Hope/Island of Tears"); and on American politics ("Robert Kennedy Remembered" won an Oscar in 1968).

Guggenheim was awed by the spiritual depth and gritty determination of everyday people—the patriotism of Japanese Americans interned in a camp; workers at the Arch who proudly brought their families on Sundays to show what they'd accomplished; frightened troops riding the launches into Normandy, ready to offer up their lives.

I remember seeing Guggenheim at the July 4 festivities at the National Archives on the Mall last year. He could have sat with the dignitaries on a dais above the crowd but chose to stand at a spot down below where he could watch the faces of the people.

"Look at them!" he marveled. "They'll wait in line all day just for a chance to see the Constitution and Declaration of Independence."

Born dyslexic, he had a gift for hearing the nuances of common speech. In his films, he lets the voices of participants carry the stories whenever possible.

"It was over. I mean, it was quiet, as if nothing had happened," says the haunting voice of a former GI in "D-Day Remembered." "The beach was not any general's business. They had no say, none what-someever."

"I cry when I hear that," Guggenheim once confided.

And these, from the liberation sequence in "Berga":

Sanford Lubinsky: "It got quiet. And then we heard that firing start up again."

Edward Slotkin: "And we look out the front . . ."

Leo Zaccaria: "And up the road comes this tank. American tank."

Lubinsky: "When I saw that American flag coming down that road, nothing looked so beautiful in all our born days. That American flag, our flag, sure looked beautiful. It's a very beautiful thing when you haven't seen it for a long while. It's a beauty!"

The narrations Guggenheim wrote in support of the voices were spare, existential.

"The sea was welcoming," narrates a deep-voiced McCullough in the D-Day film, "as if it were paying its respects to the men who had fallen, who out of a nation of millions had been selected, for reasons known only to fate, to represent us on the beach that day."

Guggenheim had a second hat, too. He was a founding father of the televised political campaign commercial.

As a young independent filmmaker in St. Louis in 1956, he'd accepted an offer to run presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson's TV campaign—Guggenheim needed the money—and then gone on to work for other candidates.

His client list amounted to a veritable political lexicon, including Kennedy, Gore Sr., Symington, McGovern, Moss, Shapp, Brown, Hays, Brademas, Ribicoff, Metzenbaum, Goldberg, Mondale, Pell, Bayh, Church, Biden, Danforth, Hollings.

Eventually, Guggenheim became disillusioned with what was evolving into a somewhat infamous institution.

"If you play a piano in a house of ill repute," he told PBS's "NewsHour With Jim Lehrer" a few years ago, "it doesn't make any difference how well you play the piano."

By the late '80s, he'd turned full time to his beloved documentaries.

"Why have you stayed with this . . . art form of yours all these years?" McCullough asked in the interview last month. "What . . . makes you want to get up out of bed in the morning?"

"I just feel compelled to say something, if I feel strongly about it," Guggenheim replied. "And I think it was . . . [director] David Lean [who] said that the greatest moment in making films, and probably the most satisfying moment in film, is getting a story you're in love with.

"So you search for those things."

Last week, as Guggenheim lay dying, "Berga" was screened for the board of the Foundation for the National Archives, a nonprofit advisory and fund-raising group of which Guggenheim was president. For most of his films, the archives was a primary source.

Grace Guggenheim read a message to the group dictated by her dad from the hospital.

"Many people know about the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence," he'd said, "but few know the treasures held in the millions of feet of film, in the countless maps and pictures and letters . . .

"Story after story is revealed from the work that is accomplished every day at the archives—the incomparable truths, all telling and retelling what is the essential American journey."

The guests filed into the theater, the lights went down.

A long-faded archival photo appeared on the screen, the camera panning slowly across it—fresh-faced American GIs of World War II, in formation.

Then the narrator's voice—clear, strong:

"This picture was taken over 50 years ago. World War II. My company. I'm in there someplace. I can remember their faces just like yesterday. And they went overseas, and I didn't, and some of them didn't come back.

"And I've been thinking about it for 50 years, wondering why it didn't happen to me.

"That's why I had to tell this story."

THAT GUY FROM ST. LOUIS

Heavily medicated in the hospital last week, Guggenheim still had glorious moments with Marion, Grace and his sons, Davis and Jonathan, both in film work.

"One day he had a resurrection of being alert," Grace said. "He hugged us all and said, 'I just want to live with you!'"

"He charmed the doctors and hospital staff. He wanted to show them the film and tell them, 'This is what you helped me make.'"

Through his window, "he could look out and see a big American flag."

They reminisced: How Davis practically had to order his reticent father to narrate "Berga" in the first person . . . how everything had gone so perfectly filming on location in Germany, snow just when they needed it.

Then, a letter arrived from Guggenheim's old friend, producer George Stevens Jr., and Grace read it to her father.

In 1962, Stevens recalled, he'd just arrived from Hollywood to do documentaries for Edward R. Murrow's U.S. Information Agency when word came that a young filmmaker from St. Louis had seen a USIA film so bad it made him "ashamed to be an American."

"Find me that guy from St. Louis!" Stevens had ordered.

"You possessed then and ever since," Stevens wrote, "an absolute true compass when it came to the integrity of your work—and our fights to keep the films we made from being dumbed down or made prosaic . . . were stimulating.

"I remember 'United in Progress' and the beautiful footage you shot of President Kennedy in Costa Rica . . . our venture to LBJ's ranch for 'The President's Country' . . . and, too, when I took you [in 1964] to meet Bob Kennedy . . . and my good fortune in having you at my side to start the Kennedy Center Honors—it was just a little scheme back then . . .

"I cherish those memories, Charles."

A long, long row of candles.

THE MASTER'S VOICE

In the closing sequence of "Berga," Guggenheim—knowing his time was short—offers a powerful, transcendent final message:

Milton Stolon (survivor): "Ah, it's no good to remember. . . . But you have to remember because people, people forget what went on."

Then old photos of the survivors returning home to their families flash on the screen—one after another, with their wives and sweethearts and kids.

The final shot: a joyful GI, the camera panning down to his smiling little girl sitting on a tricycle.

And Guggenheim's clear voice-over:

"These are just a few of the faces in my story, but there are millions of faces, and millions of stories.

"That have never been told. And deserve to be.

"You should remember that."

Mr. HOLLINGS. The great advantage of serving in the U.S. Senate is the exposure to your colleagues in the Senate, all who are talented, and the exposure to various individuals in Washington involved in the issues. The principal issue for one serving in the U.S. Senate is reelection. That's how I met Charles Guggenheim.

It was 30 years ago. Charles had the reputation of producing the best candidate films and after handling me, remarkably, he retained that reputation. My staff had just contacted him when they came back to me and surprised me with the request that Charles wanted to follow me when I went home that weekend. I said let's wait, it's too early for filming. The answer was no, it's not for filming, Mr. Guggenheim wants to travel with you to see if he likes you. I said fair enough. I want to see if I like him. I will never forget that weekend. After reciting the Pledge of Allegiance at the Rotary Club, the Realtors, the tobacco barn, the Democratic Party rally, and nine other times, I thought I may lose Charles. But he stuck with me. I learned to love him.

There are two kinds of geniuses in this world: the intellectual and the sensitive. The intellectual is the type who goes through a magazine just turning the pages and catching up in the back part with the story, remembering it all. Or the type that reads a book in a couple of evenings. But then there is the sentimental genius. They feel the words. You tell me that a friend is sick and I feel sorry for him. You tell Charles a friend is sick and he starts feeling bad. No one could read people better. He would have me do one take over and over and over just to make sure the light was right, or the sound was exact, very sensitive to the environment and feelings of those around him. No doubt this made him an Oscar winner four times and a nominee twelve times. But this search for the authentic also made him give up on us politicians 20 years ago. The political short was no more the positive attributes of the candidate depicting his record in a colorful way, but the framing of the opponent with a half-truth, with a negative spin that meets the poll. Outrageous hypocrisy. Charles would have none of it and he turned exclusively to documentaries.

Charles' brilliance was in telling the story so that you were there in the historic moment. I watched him in his work. We would meet at 6:30 in the morning two or three times a week at Ali Rosenberg's St. Albans for tennis. Ali didn't let us start until just before 7:00 so the three of us would chat about the events of the day. Charles had the keenest wit about the political happenings in Washington and, talking along, I realized his genius. It wasn't just the sensitivity, but the historian. For the D-Day film he searched the Pentagon archives for 2 years finding things that the military historians had no idea of. Then, to give life to the depiction, he searched to identify the exact outfit, down to the platoon or squad. Then he found a member of that platoon or squad still living to narrate the scene. For another 2 years he looked for Jewish POWs for his most recent film. He was mainly concerned about his own outfit from which he was separated. They were captured in the Battle of the Bulge; the Jewish prisoners separated and inflicted with torture and death. He wanted to tell this story of the POW Holocaust that had never been told. He was tickled that the weather was kind, just right for his takes at the prison camps in Germany. He smiled at his luck. And then the cancer hit. He struggled this year to finish the course. Amazing Grace, his beautiful daughter, worked with him to complete the film. In this city of families split asunder, the Guggenheims have shone as a star of cohesion. Jonathan worked as a Senate Page and now produces on the West coast. Davis has just completed a cameo production on education. And that gracious lovable Marion continues to worry about everybody except herself. Charles was particularly proud when he went west for his last nomination. His daughter-in-law, Elizabeth Shue, won an Oscar. Knowing Charles, the sensitive, the authentic, his was not to receive Oscars but to render to others in his film. But surely, if he had one to give, it would be to Marion.