

By Bob Levey

Dr. Charles Stenger, a fixture in Washington bridge for more than 65 years and a psychologist who specialized in the care of former prisoners of war, died on April 29 in Rockville. He was 95 years old.

Charlie was president of the Washington Bridge League from 1968 until 1970, and served as a board member from 1971 until 1973. He was elected the District Six representative to the ACBL Board of Directors in 1980. He served three four-year terms.

During that time, he was also president of District Six, president of the Mid-Atlantic Conference and chairman of the District Six Judiciary Committee. He was the first winner of the WBL's sportsman of the year award, in 2006. At the time of his death, Charlie had 11,989 master points.

During his time on the ACBL Board, Charlie headed a committee that recommended new ranks above life master (there are now nine) and another committee that began to formulate changes to the alert procedure. He chaired the committee that produced a national no-smoking policy. He also complained vociferously (and successfully) when the host hotel boosted room rates just before the start of the 1984 North American Bridge Championships in Washington.

On Dec. 21, 1944, Charlie was captured in Belgium by German soldiers during the Battle of the Bulge. His unit, part of the 106th Division, was about to be overrun when Charlie found a piece of white cloth and surrendered his men. A combat medic, he was held at various prison camps until May 3, 1945.

During his captivity, Charlie suffered from frozen feet that bedeviled him for the rest of his life. He also suffered back injuries when a boxcar in which he and other POWs were riding was hit by Allied bombs.

"But he never complained and he never talked about it," said his widow, Mary Lou Guandolo, also a member of the WBL. "Charlie always said, 'There are never any problems, only challenges.' "

As a bridge partner, he was always even-keeled and always looked on the bright side, Mary Lou recalled. "He would play with anybody," she said. "And he never came home and said, 'I'm playing with an idiot.' He would say, 'We played well, we just didn't score well.' "

Charles Albert Stenger was born and brought up in Akron, Ohio. He had a twin brother, John Stenger, who died three years ago. John was Charlie's first bridge partner. The Stengers learned the game around the kitchen table in their home.

Charlie married his first wife, Jeanne Stenger, in 1946. She died about 17 years ago. He received a BS in education in 1947 from The University of Akron and a PhD in clinical psychology in 1952 from Western Reserve University in Cleveland.

One of his prized possessions was a letter of reprimand he received from his academic adviser, shortly before he was awarded the PhD. "It's wonderful that you have time to play bridge when you should be working on your dissertation," the man wrote.

Charlie joined the Veterans Administration in 1947 as that fledgling agency's first chief of psychology. "No one even knew what a psychologist was supposed to do," recalled a longtime colleague, Rod Baker. Charlie spent 33 years at the VA, supervising a large staff and developing a specialty in the treatment of POWs. He was recognized several times for the care he delivered to POWs from the Vietnam War. He also treated former service members who had fought in Korea and the Pacific.

After his retirement in 1980, Charlie joined the American Ex-Prisoners of War Association as national director of services. In 2016, he was awarded the Prisoner of War Medal—one of the U.S. Army's highest decorations—at a ceremony in his home. In remarks that day, Charlie said he would always be proud to be "a soldier for life." Charlie also earned a Bronze Star and a Purple Heart.

Charlie was happy to be old-fashioned, his widow said. "He never used a computer. He never sent an e-mail. He didn't feel he needed to," she said.

And he was always ready to offer counsel about the emotions of his fellow soldiers.

One day, about ten years ago, I approached Charlie at the end of a bridge session and asked if I could speak to him. My father-in-law, who had served in France with the U.S. Army during World War Two, was near death. I had always been curious about his service, but he would never talk about it in any detail. Now the window of opportunity was closing. I asked Charlie for advice.

"Sit down," he said, in his ever-so-calm way.

For the next 30 minutes, he explained that, despite a lot of pop psychology, many former GIs coped with the horrors of war by filing those days away and trying to move past them forever. Charlie assured me that it was nothing personal. But he said that my father-in-law could not be begged, badgered or cajoled into talking. "He will only talk if and when he's ready to talk," Charlie said.

It was an unlikely scene. Chairs were being stacked, tables were being stored, bridge players were milling around the posted score sheets—and there we were, talking about the aftermath of the most destructive war in history. Charlie Stenger could have gone home. He could have given me five minutes only. But he listened, and he sympathized, and he helped.

When I thanked him, he scoffed and said: "Don't thank me. This is what I do."

"He was a healer," said a longtime colleague, Ed Nightingale. "Charlie will be remembered as a generous soul, always offering his time and encouragement."

In 2001, a reporter asked Charlie Stenger: Why bridge? For Charlie, that was an easy question.

"It's an activity for a lifetime," he said.

*Bob Levey is a retired columnist for The Washington Post. He is a Diamond Life Master and a former member of the WBL Board. He won the Bean Red Ribbon Pairs in 2010.*