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102-year-old WWII vet still makes unit reunions

by J.D. BAILEY, Banner-News | November 8, 2018 at 8:47 a.m.

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Bob Kehres, then 102, of Magnolia (middle) at an October 2018 Dyess AFB reunion near Abilene, Texas, with two current Air Force pilots and a Douglas A-20 "Havoc" bomber.

If living for more than a century on this Earth were not an accomplishment enough, it's not often that a person that far into life discovers new passions and takes up new hobbies or interests. But that is exactly the case for one Magnolia resident and veteran of the second World War.

At 102, centenarian Robert “Bob” Kehres is admittedly not a kid anymore. Born Dec. 18, 1915, the Perry, Oklahoma, native made his way to southwest Arkansas in 1939 after graduating as a petroleum engineer from the University of Oklahoma at Norman the year prior.

As he worked for Berry Petroleum Co. in Waterloo, near Willisville, he was soon married to Dorothy “Dot” Beene of Magnolia. Except for his treks halfway across the globe as an officer in the Army Air Corps, Kehres has called Magnolia home ever since.



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At 26, Kehres' military career began in the weeks following the infamous Dec. 7, 1941, Japanese surprise bombing of Pearl Harbor, where a previously reluctant nation was thrust front-and-center into the global war against the Axis powers.

"I heard about the bombing on the radio," Kehres said. "I knew the draft was coming, so I decided enlist in the Air Force."

With a college degree under his belt, the German-blooded American was quickly trained, commissioned as an aircraft engineer in the 416th Bombardment Group, and ready to set sail to England to aid the Allies.

"We left from New York," the war vet added. "There were ships as far as you could see, and there we were, right at the front."

The group as a whole flew some 280 missions over Europe. Kehres became a captain in the Air Corps, serving as a supervising officer over the squadron's crew chief and his enlisted men.

"They hated it when they saw an aircraft come back with flack damaged," added Kehres. "They could make those planes look brand new."

After serving from 1942-47 in the Air Corps and having been a part of missions in England, France, and Germany throughout the war, Kehres returned to Magnolia and his wife after his discharge.

For the next three decades, he worked in and around the area as a petroleum engineer, retiring in 1976. In his post career, the spry 60-something became an avid sportsman — especially talented in golf and an almost daily player. But when Dot passed away in 2000, the 85-year-old was no longer able to walk the course and swing the irons like he could in the year's past. Thus began a slightly less physically demanding hobby and a rekindled interest in his World War II past.

"When my wife died, I had to find something to do," said Kehres. "I had to have something to keep my mind working."

Having only attended a few sporadic 416th Bomber Group reunions before, the former Douglas A-20 Havoc and A-26 Invader bomber aircraft engineer soon became a regular at the annual gatherings.

"I find that I've devoted my last number of years to going over what I have [from the war]," Kehres said.

As an attendee of most of the past 12 or 13 reunions, the yearly travels have taken him from Albuquerque, N.M., to his native Oklahoma, and as far as Washington, D.C. The most recent event was held Oct. 5-7 in and around Abilene, Texas, and Dyess AFB.

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As he neared his centennial though, traveling to the events were and are not a solo venture. With the help of another military veteran and friend, former Magnolia resident Bob Laird over the past few years has been Kehres' primary travel companion.

"He's was in the Army," added the World War II veteran. "I met him through his wife as a Catholic, about five or six years ago. He is a good friend and he was a great help getting to the reunions."

Laird, now a Florida resident, also aided Kehres at recent Veteran's Day events in Magnolia.

One of Kehres' more memorable trips involved a tour of Air Force One during last year's trip to the nation's capital. Through a connection, the former bomber group engineer was able to board the President's personal plane and see first-hand the pilot's viewpoint in the massive modified Boeing jet.

"We toured the back end of the plane, then I told them I wanted to see the cockpit," he said.

And he did.

Now, the war vet shares and receives his military photos and reunion updates over a device he long avoided — the computer and the internet. He says that even though he is slow with the technology, it's a good way to communicate and share events.

He also has plenty of physical photos of past European theatre events, including his unit's landing on the "hallowed grounds" of Omaha Beach in the months after D-Day, the group's first foray into the mainland French town of Melun, located just south of Paris, during winter 1944, as well as countless others.

When asked about his service in the war, Kehres shies away from any perceptions of glory or admiration. He says the ones who truly deserve remembrance are the countless men that never came back home. The ones which gave their lives, pushing through the massive hedgerows in France, in order for his unit to set up camp there weeks later, and the men who did not return from treacherous bomber flights over allied territory.

"Those guys are the heroes, not me," he said. "I'm not looking for honor. I was just doing what the government told me."

At nearly 103, Kehres says he still feels good and enjoys every day. His neighbors routinely check in with him and he looks forward to all that 2019's 416th Bomber Group reunion has in store.

"The next one is in New Orleans," he said. "I'd like to make that one if I'm still around."

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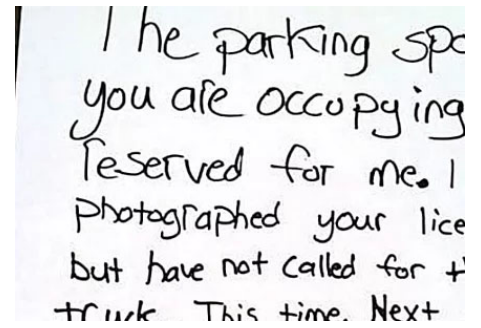
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