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103-year-old Magnolia resident, WWII vet passes away

by J.D. Bailey, Banner-News | July 14, 2019 at 1:01 p.m.

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A Banner-News stock photo shows the then 102-year-old Robert ("Bob") Kehres at a November 11, 2018, Southern Arkansas University Veteran's Day program. The longtime Magnolia resident and veteran of World War II's European Theatre passed away Thursday night. - Photo by J.D. Bailey

Robert (“Bob”) Kehres, one of the oldest living residents of Magnolia, has passed away. The 103-year-old was a resident of Magnolia for nearly 80 years. He was married to his beloved wife, Dorothy “Dot” Kehres, until her passing in 2000.

Kehres was a World War II veteran and Army officer specializing in aircraft engineering. He served the entirety of America’s involvement in the conflict, having volunteered just months after the Dec. 7, 1941, Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. His war time service took him to from training grounds in the U.S. to the European Theatre and the Allied D-Day invasion of France in June 1944. He served from 1942 to 1947 in the Army Air Corps. He was part of missions in England, France, and Germany. He exited the military as a captain, then moved back to Magnolia.

He was also a devout Catholic and member of Immaculate Heart of Mary Catholic Church in Magnolia. He often played the piano during Mass.



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As a Banner-News subscriber since 1948 and one of the few known centenarians in the area, Kehres was the subject of multiple newspaper pieces over the years. He appeared as a feature article subject in December 2015, just after celebrating his 100th birthday, and again in November 2018 as a 102-year-old who still attended military unit reunions across the country. He took great pride in his newspaper appearances, routinely offering papers to any interested reader. He resided for decades at his home in Magnolia.

He passed away Thursday, July 11, 2019. He was Born Dec. 18, 1915, in Perry, Oklahoma. He first came to Columbia County in 1939.

Below are passages from the Dec. 21, 2015, Banner-News feature article by Deena Hardin titled “Front and Center: Kehres Reflects on Life After Celebrating 100th Birthday” and the Nov. 8, 2018, piece by J.D. Bailey titled “102-year-old WWII Vet Still Makes Reunions.”

“Front and Center” excerpt:

In the latter part of 1941, Kehres met his future wife Dorothy (“Dot”) Beene on a blind date. “She was a native of Magnolia, Arkansas, but was employed by an oil company in Tulsa, and she was home on vacation with her sister. One of these fellows I worked with up there knew them, and he drove us around, and I became infatuated with her.”

Back at work in Waterloo, Kehres heard on the radio that Pearl Harbor had been attacked. Soon afterward, he drove to Tulsa and asked Dot to marry him. “I said, ‘Let’s go look for wedding rings. I’ve got \$100, that’s all I’ve got.’ That’s the way the times were.” His job in Waterloo paid 43 cents an hour.

When Kehres told Dot that he could be drafted at any moment, a friend of hers told him that the Air Force was looking for qualified engineers for the war effort. He sent his birth certificate and college transcript to the Air Force office. In March of 1942 he and Dot were married. After a two-week honeymoon in New Orleans, they returned home to find his draft notice in the mail, ordering him to appear in Little Rock in just a few days.

As it turned out, the Army had sent the draft notice, but Kehres had already been in negotiations with the Air Force to enlist as an officer. He ended up with orders to go to Pine Bluff for his Air Force physical, where he was told he was three pounds overweight. “That meant that I couldn’t get in the Air

Force. I said, 'What can I do?' He was directed to a health unit down the street where he went into a "sweat box" and got the three pounds off in a few minutes.

In June of 1942, Kehres went to Chanute Field in Rantoul, Ill., for training in the engineering office. "Stayed there 90 days. I became what they call a 90 Day Wonder, a Second Lieutenant in the Air Force. Dot was staying in Champaign, Illinois, which was a short distance away. I got orders November 28 to go to Will Rogers Field in Oklahoma City." There he was assigned to his unit, the 416th Bombardment Group, 670th Bomb Squadron, which was made up of combat crews, gunners, and pilots, as well as maintenance crews.



Kehres (right) and bomber group physician "Doc" Reichert as Army Air Corps captains in Melun, France, during winter 1944.

Kehres spent the winter 1942 and spring and summer of '43 in training in Illinois and Lake Charles, La., learning about the planes for which he would supervise maintenance. His unit left from New York City in a huge convoy of ships escorted by the USS Arkansas (a dreadnought battleship).

“We arrived in the Firth of Clyde, Scotland,” he said. They were then transported by 40/8 train cars to Wethersfield, England, where they were greeted by Berlin Annie’s chilling radio transmissions, “Welcome! We’ll come see you!”

“Shortly after that the bombers flew over. They were headed for London but we didn’t know that. We scrambled for room in the bunkers. We did that for several weeks,” he said.

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“From that base, in September of ‘44, we boarded LSTs in Southampton for Omaha Beach. We went to Melun, France. Each squadron had about 19 planes. The people I had were dedicated people. They took care of those planes like the people over here take care of their new cars. They would moan if they [the planes] had flak damage.”

By November of 1944, the A-20 Havocs that the 416th BG flew were phased out for new A-26 Invaders. The 416th attacked transportation facilities, communications centers, and large concentrations of German troops during the Battle of the Bulge (Dec. ‘44-Jan. ‘45), and reclaimed an air base at Laon-Couvron that had been occupied by the Germans. “We lived in tents on the ground. We had nothing but tents. Baths were out of the question. No hot water. The French didn’t have anything. We’d heat our K-rations on exhaust pipes.”

Kehres received a short leave at one point and was able to tour Paris, visiting the Louvre, Napoleon’s tomb, the Arc de Triomphe, Notre Dame, the Moulin Rouge, Montmartre, and other sites with his brother Paul, who was serving in another company nearby.

The 416th continued to aid the Allied push into Germany from February through May of 1945, during which time Hitler committed suicide. Kehres was preparing to board a ship in Marseilles, France, bound for Japan to continue his service, when the announcement was made that bombs had been dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. At that point, he said, “I’d been away from my wife for two years.” He was home shortly after receiving word that the war was over, leaving the Air Force as Captain Kehres.

“I wanted to stay in the service. It was a very secure place, but my wife’s mother was living in Magnolia, alone, and I decided not to stay in the service. I’ve been here ever since 1947. There were many young folks coming back at that time. There was beaucoup entertainment, dances, parties. My wife was an excellent dancer. We had great times in those days,” he said.

“Still Makes Reunions” excerpt:

For the next three decades, he worked in and around the Magnolia 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 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.



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.

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 firsthand 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.

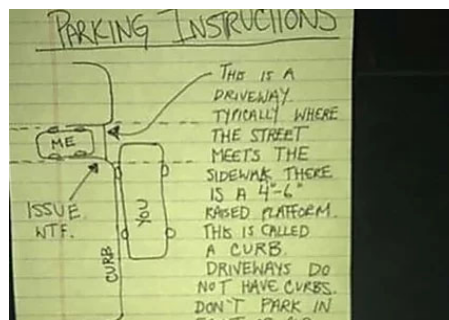
When asked about his service in the war, Kehres shies away from any perceptions of glory or admiration. He says the ones who truly deserve remembrance are the countless men that never came back home. The ones which gave their lives, pushing through the massive hedgerows in France, in order for his unit 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.”

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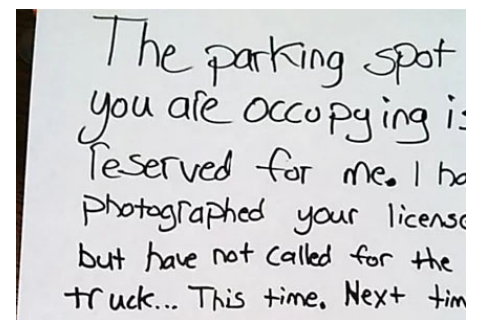
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