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## Bomb Group reunion takes in 12th Armored Division museum in weekend stay in Abilene

**Timothy Chipp**, Abilene Reporter-News Published 4:49 p.m. CT Oct. 5, 2018



(Photo: Timothy Chipp/Reporter-News)

Outside the 12th Armored Division Memorial Museum, Robert Kehres wondered what his eyes were seeing.

An engineering officer during World War II, Kehres, now 102 years old, didn't recognize the three pieces of vehicular equipment in the museum lot, and the German turret alongside them. But they held his attention.

Kehres wasn't involved in combat so he hadn't really seen the tanks and guns while serving the country during the war.

"We occupied air bases," Kehres said. "The only time I got away from there was a pass. In England, it was to London."

Kehres spent the morning accompanied by Kathy Rensner, who politely guided his wheelchair through the museum.

Rensner's uncle Francis De Mand had flown missions with the 416th Bomb Group, the same group in which Kehres served. A reunion of the group in Albuquerque, New Mexico, brought Rensner and Kehres together.

It's also what brought the pair, along with two other surviving World War II veterans and several family members of other deceased members, to Abilene.

Setting up shop within the MCM Elegante Suites, the reunion kicked off Thursday with about 20 participants.



**William Lenches, executive director and curator of the 12th Armored Division Memorial Museum in Abilene, speaks Friday to a visiting group of World War II veterans.** (Photo: Timothy Chipp/Reporter-News)

Flying A-20 Havocs and A-26 Invaders, the 416th Bomb Group flew more than 10,000 sorties on 285 missions against German targets in France and Germany during the war, a news release about the reunion said. The group flew the first A-20 mission ever to bomb Germany, became the first group in the world to completely convert to the A-26 Invader, and the first 9th Air Force Bomb Group to fly missions in Czechoslovakia as well as Austria.

In addition to touring the museum, the group was welcomed at Dyess Air Force Base and Frontier Texas!

Dyess Commander Col. Brandon Parker will give the keynote address at a banquet Saturday evening. Earlier in the day a memorial service will honor service men and women who died in the war and since.

De Mand, Rensner's uncle, was one of those killed in the war. She said she grew up knowing very little about him because her grandmother was hard pressed to speak of him.

She and her brother learned more about him after joining the reunions for the bomb group, she said.

"He was on his 49th mission as a pilot and was shot down over Willich, Germany ... outside of Cologne. He was buried ... in Holland. I never knew much about him. We didn't have the internet when I was growing up. And my

grandmother was just grief-stricken. She had lost her husband when my uncle was only 4 years old. To lose her only son, it was just devastating to her. So she never really talked about it."

Rensner and her brother, she said, attended a bomb group reunion in Indianapolis in 2014 to learn more about their uncle. She said one of the pilots, who attended the Abilene reunion, Dave Andrews Jr., was the one who spotted her uncle's downed aircraft, which exploded with him inside.

"That was our first exposure to the 416th," she said, "and we've been adopted and loved on ever since."



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**William Lenches, executive director and curator of the 12th Armored Division Memorial Museum, explains to the visiting 416th Bomb Group reunion the challenges he faces explaining life during World War II to younger generations of students. The reunion group, including three World War II veterans in wheelchairs, visited the museum Friday as part of the three-day gathering. (Photo: Timothy Chipp/Reporter-News)**

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