

## Walter Kelly was a flying ace for the Mighty Eighth

BY MARIA SONNENBERG

Large doses of courage and ability, plus a bit of good luck, enabled Colonel Walter Kelly to fly 52 missions against the Nazis and 38 against the Japanese without incurring a scratch.

Growing up in Norristown, Pa., the tavern keeper's son nurtured his inner fly boy with barnstorming bouts with his dad's friends.

With a bachelor's in electrical engineering from Villanova University, Kelly worked for General Electric for just seven months before enlisting with the Army Air Corps in 1941.

Although his GE career was short, it introduced Kelly to a very important person in his life.

"My boss put this beautiful girl to work beside me," said Kelly. "She was so beautiful I could hardly talk to her."

Kelly did manage to strike up a conversation, one that lasted 63 years, with Eileen, his beloved wife.

The young pilot earned his wings in the O-52s, clunky beasts that did not satisfy his need for speed and even many decades later still earns his disdain.

"It was a lousy airplane, a turkey," he said.

When he chanced upon a bulletin board notice for a B-17 assignment, he jumped at the chance to learn to fly them at McDill Air Force Base.

"I flew them morning, afternoon and evening for three weeks," he said. "I was



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*Walter Kelly flew so impressively during WWII, General Jimmy Doolittle requested him as his personal pilot.*

made a commander in a month."

With the 97th Bomb Group, the 23-year-old pilot was sent to Europe with his group, later to join the 8th Air Force.

"That was a bunch of courageous guys," he said.

His experiences with the group feature prominently in Gerald Astor's *The Mighty Eighth*, which profiles the importance of the Air Force during the war in Europe.

Cocky and with a fierce hatred for Hitler, Kelly piloted the Heidi Ho during the first all-American raid on German-occupied territory in Europe. That same mission, Major Paul W. Tibbetts was in

charge of Butcher Shop. In less than three years, Tibbetts would be in control of the Enola Gay over Hiroshima.

Kelly's flying expertise caught the eye of General Jimmy Doolittle, who later engaged him as his personal pilot during Doolittle's command trips.

"He didn't like to fly the big airplanes," said Kelly.

After 25 or 35 missions, most pilots were sent back home, but Kelly stayed on for 52 before being given his promotion orders and sent to Algiers prior to returning home.

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At headquarters in Algiers, he bumped into Doolittle.

"What the hell are you doing here, Kelly?" asked the general.

After Kelly told him about his promotion orders, Doolittle instructed an aide to get Kelly promoted immediately.

"I was a captain in 20 minutes," said Kelly.

Luck was on his side in Europe, as well as during his 38 later missions in the Pacific theater. "I always made it home," he said.

He never lost a member of his crew or his plane, but on many occasions he barely made it back. His luck almost ran out over the Pacific.

"With two engines out, we landed in Iwo Jima after the Marines had captured it," he said.

After the war, Kelly was able to realize his dream of attending engineering school at Wright Field. For three years, he was assigned to Wiesbaden in Germany, where as deputy director of mutual security programs, he was charged with transferring the air fields back to peacetime duty. At Lowell University in Massachusetts, he taught aeronautics.

He retired from the service in 1967 and found a new career with Motorola. Eighteen years later, at age 72, Kelly called it quits with the world of work.

"I decided I would just play tennis for the rest of my life," he said.

For Kelly, tennis came second only to Eileen as a lifelong passion.

"I've played tennis all my life," he said.

He was on the courts daily until an ankle injury forced him to give up the sport two years ago, at age 89.

"I now go to the gym and the swimming pool," said Kelly.

Like his love for Eileen, his affection for Brevard was instantaneous.

"I came down here from Alexandria, Virginia, on vacation, and I liked it so much I didn't bother to go back," he said. *SL*

