

# Cumberland native serves Air Corps

William Joseph Kelly Jr. didn't decide to sign up for the United States Army Air Corps (USAAC) at age 21 – Uncle Sam decided for him. During the World War II era, enlistment in the military was mandatory.

"If you were physically fit, you went," said Mr. Kelly, inducted July 15, 1941, at Fort Meade (From 1926 to 1941, USAAC was the predecessor of the U.S. Army Air Forces, today's U.S. Air Force.)

Four days later, the young man transferred as a Private to Luke Field, Ariz. and was assigned to the 74th Air Base Group.

At the abandoned Civilian Conservation Corp (CCC) camp, Mr. Kelly recalls there was nothing there but desert. "Luke Field was in such poor condition. The one and only bomber couldn't get off the ground. It was almost impossible to live there." Cots were set up in a small airplane hanger and a hose represented a cold shower. Sidewinder snakes slithering by was a common sight.

One of the only forms of recreation was horseback riding. He and several buddies regularly exercised horses owned by a commanding officer. "There were a few comic situations," he remembered.

USO entertainers on their way through Arizona often stopped to entertain the men on base. "We were fortunate in Yuma," said Mr. Kelly. "Everything that came out of California came through. We saw many famous people" such as ventriloquist Edgar Bergen and his sidekick puppet, Charlie McCarthy.

Later that summer, Mr. Kelly was assigned to the 66th Air Base Squadron as administrative clerk in the Squadron Orderly Room. Appointments while on duty included Pfc, Corporal, and Sergeant.

As the war increased, the base grew along with the Air Corps itself, and the Cumberland native served more than the year he had intended. December 7, 1941, changed his plans as Pearl Harbor was attacked, extending all military personnel's service.

The following spring he was relieved from duty and assigned to the Yuma Project Office, still at Luke Field, as an administrative clerk. He was then transferred to the 403rd Base Headquarters and Air Base Squadron, Yuma Army Air Field, Yuma, Ariz.; designated Acting First Sergeant.

In a report written by a lieutenant, which Mr. Kelly shared with The Catholic Review, the 403rd base headquarters "was composed of a particularly high caliber group of enlisted men ... the squadron aptly reflects the true American spirit of cooperation, inventiveness and adaptability, which is the unknown factor in the equation of war that will ultimately mean the utter defeat of our enemies."

As a member of the Catholic War Vets Post 736, Mr. Kelly has received awards for participating in various educational programs. He retired in 1981 from the State Department of Public Safety and Corrections.

Since 1962, he has been a parishioner of St. Joseph, Sykesville. Mr. Kelly is the father of two sons and four grandchildren. He married Cecilia Kelly in 2002 after losing Peggy Kelly in 2000, his wife of "59 years, five months and 10 days," he said. "We were high school sweethearts."