

Jim Kilgour:

The world is his playground

By ADAM WOJCIEHOWICZ
Staff Writer

I recently was obligated to visit a senior citizens home. Fortunately for me, what started out as an obligation, became quite a pleasure, and I will be revisiting the home again this Christmas. In light of Veterans' Day, I would like to share an account of my rather humbling experience. I also hope to enlighten my readers to the enormous possibilities available, courtesy of the wisdom our elders possess.

Jim Kilgour may need to pop his prosthetic leg into place if you meet him, and if he does, he'll most likely set it up as if it were a good joke: "Hey, come here! Listen to this!"

At this point you should be well aware that 83-year-old Jim couldn't care less about the trivialities now offered by life. There is a positively jubilant glow in his eyes, and it matches the tone of his voice perfectly, as he bounds verbally from one marvel to the next.

He seemed quaintly embodied by my inquiry about possible regrets in life; it elicited physical recoil at the sheer absurdity of the implication.

"Oh hell, no!" came the accompanying reply. When he introduced his life story, Jim knew to start at the beginning; however, before long, events would expand wildly into nothing short of an epic.

The Kilgour name originates from Scotland as the title of a clan that spread to America in 1634. The capital area provided a home for the family of Scots, not to mention seats in the pew one row behind the Washingtons — George and Martha.

After many years, the Kilgour name could claim residents of Percyville in the vicinity of Fairfax, Virginia. It was into such a family that Jim was born, in the year 1917.

While it exists now as a low-level sprawling city, a young boy could find only pastoral meadows and horse-driven vehicles in Percyville around the time of World War I's conclusion. Jim's time in Virginia was short though, as his family moved to Lancaster, Pa., in the middle of his childhood. He spent most of his growing years in this second home.

Since Jim sees no point to loitering around any unremarkable years, it must have been a fairly ordinary childhood.

He shifts to life as a young adult. College found him at Dartmouth University, where he graduated. Once out of college though, in the early 1940's, the WWII draft loomed overhead.

The war itself did not intimidate Jim — what he most dreaded was the prospect of dying a lowly GI, a random set of bones in an obscure part of the world.

With experience as a commercial pilot, the opportunity to fulfill a long time dream presented itself: life on an

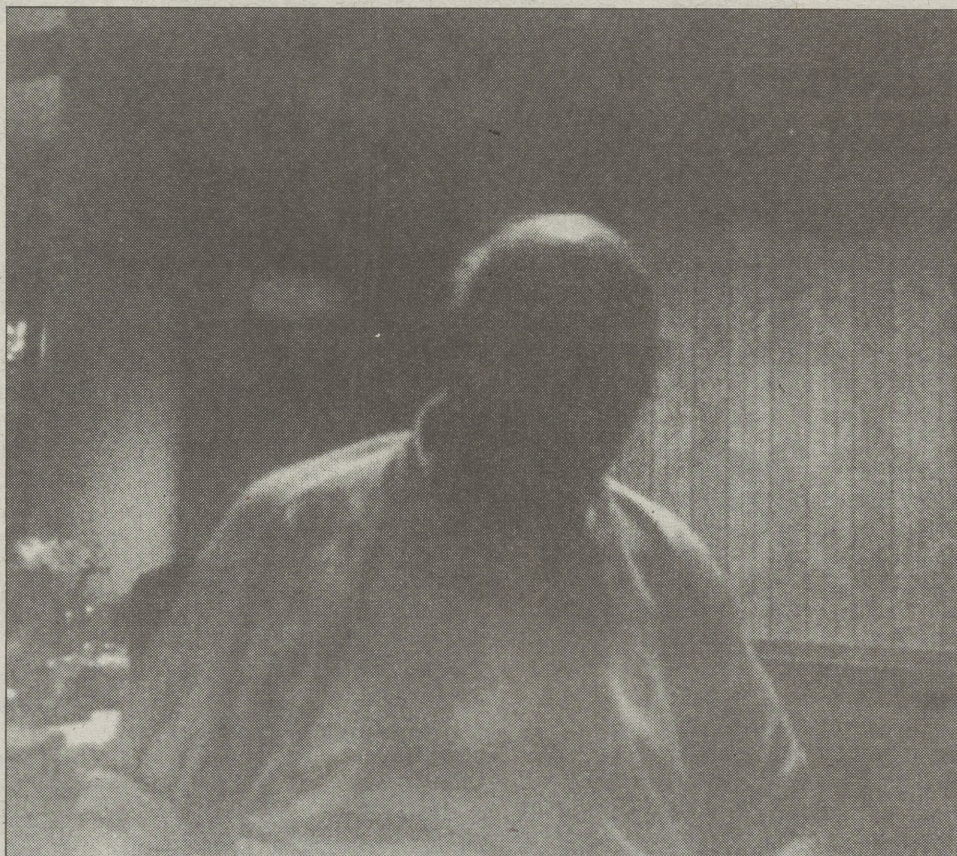


Photo by Adam Wojciehowicz

Jim Kilgour talks about his life experiences and his time in the military.

aircraft carrier.

Jim volunteered for the Naval Air Corps as soon as possible. Accepted, he still had to find a way onto a carrier, a problem that was solved with the virtue of simplicity in mind. A friendly visit to the Pentagon seemed to be in order. After flying into the capital via a private plane, Jim walked unannounced into the United States' military headquarters and kindly requested specific orders. In 10 days time, he had them.

In the course of training, Jim took the regular national tour of military preparation facilities in Jamestown, Pensacola, and, eventually, Pearl Harbor.

With a few months of final education at Pearl, he boarded the fourth Fleet's new Essex-class carrier Bon Homme Richard in 1945. The beloved vessel would become affectionately known as Bonnie Dick.

Life aboard was, in Jim's own words, "great." Men lived as kings on the Bonnie Dick, aside from the occasional kamikaze attack run, with incredible food and companions to keep company with the whole time.

Jim was an F6F Hellcat pilot in a night-fighter squadron for the first half of '45, but flew two-man Prisoner of War camp reconnaissance missions over the Japanese islands later on.

The beautiful step-forming garden hillsides on the island of Honshu were a common sight on these low-level missions. Carrier landings during these times of relatively low technology were quite harrowing, he recalls.

"Your life is totally in his hands," Jim said, in reference to the landing directors, who visually gauged every

aspect of an incoming aircraft and radioed any inconsistencies.

His time on the carrier lasted little more than a year, but he remembers his tour fondly. Once the war had ended, however, things got particularly interesting.

News of the super weapon that had razed Hiroshima reached the Bonnie Dick as it approached the Japanese mainland in '46. Naturally, Jim and his friends were fascinated. He remembers the ensuing conversation with a buddy in exact words: "Come on, Jim! Let's go."

The two pilots proceeded to "borrow" a dive-bomber for a scenic tour of Hiroshima — at an altitude of 100 feet.

Unfortunately, they were completely unaware of the radiation danger.

The city of Tokyo was the next stop for the carrier, where the crew was given exactly one day to sightsee. Blond German prostitutes were apparently a common sight at the time. Jim later stood under the podium of a man he considers one of the greatest ever, General MacArthur, as a speech sounded out to the city's mixed inhabitants. The day was enjoyed with a canteen full of bourbon.

The Bon Homme Richard came into port at San Francisco towards the end of 1946. Thus relieved of active duty, Jim hopped a military flight back to Washington, D.C., free of charge.

For many years following the War, Jim occupied a position as export manager in what began as a small time company by the name of Armstrong.

He started out living for two years in Cincinnati, where the company was based. His wife, with whom he had married during the war, and their

three daughters accompanied him. The company grew, to say the least.

Jim developed an internal force of salespeople and then moved on to construct an external force — all the while educating the individuals and making sales negotiations himself.

The life was good, but his family was not best served by the location; hence, the family's welfare prompted a move to Philadelphia, where they would reside for the next 23 years.

The export business still thrived, and now Jim was operating with offices not only in Philadelphia, but New York, Newark, Cincinnati and a host of other closer cities.

Jim's greatest years had yet to come.

Until his retirement two years early in 1963, the world was Jim's playground. He made roughly three six-week business trips each year. He did business in the Philippines, Latin America, Eastern and Western Europe, the Caribbean, and across the continent of Africa.

This one-time small company was now worth millions of dollars and had business relations to 95 countries worldwide, largely due to Jim's effort.

Perhaps it goes without saying, but only when I inquired did he admit to considering this feat of business management his greatest accomplishment.

There's a simple modesty to Jim, as if he wants to avoid speaking too soon — lest another wonder arise to top the last one.

Before retirement, a short but successful stint in the toy business and some assistance to a friend running barrels of rum to Nassau helped spice thing up a little for Jim.

Jim's three daughters, having each earned their master's degrees, have made him quite proud today. His second eldest, Barbara, even competed as an Olympic swimmer.

Jim's now a member of Over 50 clubs across America and in the United Kingdom. He's a close friend of famed basketball coach Bob Knight.

As he has done for many decades now, he finds time to occasionally visit friends in Lancaster, where he grew up. Lastly, Jim is an avid stock market tradesman.

At the end of my session, I was thoroughly exhausted.

But Jim remained as lively as ever. I asked him if he had any advice.

"You have to have integrity," he said.

Such an elusive quality now seemed to have been a strong underlying theme to his life; I don't think I could have asked for anything more.

It was strange to look back when I was on my way out. Why exactly was it so difficult to leave this man and his amazing history behind? History has always been left behind, for as long as there has been a history.

I walked back and shook his hand, thanking him several times, just to make sure. I believe he understood. It was a little easier to walk out then.

Penn State Delco honors scholarship winners at reception

The first annual Penn State Delaware County Fall Honors Reception was held on Wednesday, Sept. 27, 2000, in the Classroom Building Lounge.

Approximately 90 students who received incoming scholarships for the 2000-2001 academic year were recognized by Dr. George Franz,

Director of Academic Affairs. Franz emceed the event.

Some of the scholarship winners were as follows:

The Adult Student Organization Scholarship: Louis Cohen

The John E. and Judith Baillis Endowed Scholarship: Laurie Lucidonio

The Barnes and Noble Presidential Scholarship: Valery Annunzio, Robert Heise David Mahan

The Commonwealth College Scholarship Award: Sarah Burney, Adam Butler, Daireen Garcia, Vincent Handley, Stephanie McLaughlin, Catherine Nguyen, Jessica Olmstead, David Park, Mark Presloid, Andrew

Robbins, Kevin Stephany, Matthew Wilkins

The Jane E. Cooper Part-time Adult Student Scholarship: Shawn Hill

The Gates Millennium Award: Taisha Mc Gilberry

The Barbara S. Iannacone Memorial Award: Shawn Hill