

# Skagit Valley Herald

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## MEMORIAL DAY 2002

# WWII vet keeps on flying

*Concrete pilot remains matter-of-fact about his experience in war*

By **BILL CRAIG**  
Staff Writer



# Election of hard-line could mean trouble for Colombian rebels

By **JARED KOTLER**  
Associated Press Writer

BOGOTA, Colombia — Colombians willing to endure a bloody war in order to crush a 38-year-old insurgency on Sunday elected as president Alvaro Uribe, a hard-liner who has pledged to

Uribe supporters demonstrated through Bogota with camp posters plastered on their windows, beeping their horns in celebration. "This is the beginning of a new country!" shouted Enrique Vergara, a public

**Uribe elected**

"We are going to defeat the

# Concrete pilot remains matter-of-fact about his experience in war

By **BILL CRAIG**  
Staff Writer

**C**ONCRETE — Walter “Widgeon” Keilt flew 28 missions over Germany in World War II in a B-17 Flying Fortress. He came home without a scratch.

Today, the 80-year-old Concrete resident flies his Grumman Widgeon floatplane — the basis for his nickname — to his cabin on a lake in British Columbia.

Keilt hasn’t let age, or colon cancer, slow him down.

The veteran likes to work on his planes in his hangar at the Concrete Airport. In addition to his Widgeon, Keilt owns a Midget Mustang that he has worked on for 15 years. Just a few more hours of work and it should be ready to fly, he said.

Born in New York and raised in New Jersey, Keilt started flying when he was 14 or 15, after his father took him to see an airplane in Hackensack.

“That’s what got me hooked,” he said.

Keilt then paid \$10 to take flying lessons.

**After the war broke out** and Franklin Roosevelt asked for pilots to join the war effort, Keilt volunteered for the Army Air Corps Aviation Cadet program.

Keilt wanted to fly P-38 Lightnings, dual-engine fighter airplanes, but he was assigned to B-17s. One Flying Fortress could drop 4,000 pounds of bombs in one trip and take brutal poundings from enemy fire.

“I thought the B-17 was a wonderful airplane,” he said.

Commissioned as a first lieutenant, Keilt was responsible for a crew of nine men on his plane. For the most part, his days were boring, he said. He flew missions from three to nine hours, dropping bombs over places named Berlin, Bremen, Frankfurt and Schweinfurt from his base in Thurleigh, England.

Keilt and his crew assigned to the Weary Bones earned the Distinguished Flying Cross, an award that Keilt humbly remarked was given out to a lot of crews just for not getting themselves killed.



Matt Wallis / Skagit Valley Herald

**Walter Keilt of Concrete**, who successfully flew 28 missions in Europe during World War II, enjoys flying his 50-year-old Grumman Widgeon floatplane to a cabin in British Columbia.

“It was a morale-booster,” he said.

The crew received its distinguished unit citation after taking enemy fire on Feb. 22, 1944. While on a bombing run to Bernburg, the plane was intercepted by German Me-109s, their 200-millimeter cannons popping in the distance.

“We could see the end of their wings winking at us,” he said. “They would be like little balls of cotton.”

When one of the planes screamed toward the B-17, Keilt called out to his gunners.

“For Christ’s sake, shoot!” he barked.

When they landed, the plane’s side was strafed with bullets.

Being shot up wasn’t so

unusual for the massive bombers.

“There was a lot of flak flying around,” Keilt said. “It was easy to get flak holes.”

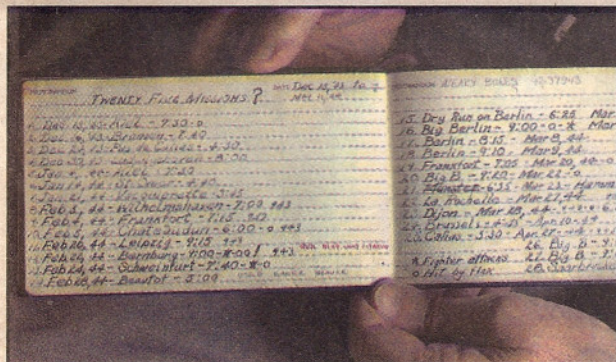
One time, he said, actor Jimmy Cagney showed up in Thurleigh and asked how the planes could still fly with all the holes in them.

“They fly great as long as the holes are in the right place,” Keilt told him.

Though not the stuff of movies, Keilt’s experience was probably typical of the 2 million people who served in the war. There were periods of excitement, but, for the most part, it was monotonous.

**More recently**, Keilt waged a battle that threatened his life as much as any German Messerschmitt.

Last year he was diagnosed with



**Keilt’s mission logbook** records his bombing runs over locations in Europe. He was never shot down.



# MEMORIAL DAY 2002

## Pilot says 'It's past history'

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colon cancer, but doctors were able to get all of it out, he said. He feels good now.

Keilt served in Europe for about eight months and spent three years in the Army Air Corps.

About every six months, Keilt will look at his black-and-white pictures of old friends and people he met. There is one of a pretty woman with dark hair that Keilt said he admired — but for a short time.

"I dropped her like a hot potato when I found out that she smoked," he said.

As for Memorial Day, Keilt said he doesn't celebrate the war or attend parades.

"It's just another day to me," he said matter-of-factly. "Memorial Day is the day I buried my cat."

Keilt lives with another cat in his Concrete apartment. Two other cats visit often.

For Keilt, taking part in the war was something that had to be done. When it was over, life went on.

"It's past history," he said. "You can only live it once."



In this photo taken in 1943 or 1944, the crew of the Weary Bones poses with their B-17 bomber. Walter Keilt is at the far right in the front row.

**Looking at the war** nearly 60 years hence, Keilt said he and his crew had some fun.

One day his crew made a parachute and oxygen mask for a Scottish terrier named Boike that the crew adopted as a mascot and took to England from Nebraska. The crew took Boike on a run over Thurleigh and threw him out. The parachute deployed, the dog landed safely, yipped and promptly ran to the nearest tree he could find to relieve himself, Keilt said.

Right before D-Day, June 6, 1944, Keilt left England to become an instructor pilot in

Florida, where he remained until the end of the war.

In the early 1950s, Keilt flew out west and decided that he liked it better than New Jersey. He worked as a structural engineer with Boeing and then with Northrop. He built a house in Seattle and then on Lake Whatcom. He was married for two years, but his wife didn't enjoy his Irish sense of humor, he said.

Keilt eventually settled in Concrete after building a hangar for the Widgeon he bought in the mid-1950s.

In his hangar, the Widgeon sits prominently in the center surrounded by barrels of oil and

boxes. Having not been flown since last year, the Widgeon has a thin coating of dust. Keilt plans to fly to his cabin near Lonesome Lake in British Columbia, where he would like to settle eventually.

Keilt's fondness for airplanes goes so far that he said he would like to change his surname to Widgeon. After all, he said, folks in Concrete already call him that. Why not make it official?

"It wouldn't be too hard," he said with a smile.

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