

Going” “You’ve Got to Keep Going” “You’ve Got to Keep Going” “You’ve

:: by Lia Tremblay

After the Pearl Harbor attack that prompted the United States to join World War II, Dec. 7, 1941 was famously described as “a date which will live in infamy.”

It was also the day Thomas Durkin, then just 18 years old, decided his destiny. Although he’d taken a job with the railroad after his graduation from high school, that day inspired him to



follow the footsteps of his older brothers, right into the military.

A keen interest in aviation led him to the Army Air Forces, a component of the U.S. Army that

would eventually become the Air Force. He reported to Atlantic City, N.J., for basic training, where he and his fellow recruits encountered their first test: the immunization line.

“One step forward, simultaneous shots in each arm, and repeat,” Durkin recalled about the line of shirtless recruits.

As his turn approached, he was startled to see the young man in front of him pass out and crumple to the floor. The medics shrugged and gestured to Durkin to keep the line moving. So he pressed on and got his shots.

“What could I do?” he said. “We had to keep going.”

Durkin, who is now 97 years old, has made “keep going” a common refrain throughout his life. He kept going through pilot training, where he learned to fly single- and twin-engine aircraft through daylight and darkness. He kept going through missions

to bomb heavily defended targets in Germany, Austria and Romania — at one point having his oxygen mask torn away by shrapnel. He kept going when the war was won, accepting his commission as a second lieutenant while many of his peers moved on to civilian life.

In 1947, during one of the worst blizzards in New York City’s history, he married the Staten Island girl he’d traded letters with while overseas. Together, he and Anne kept going through two more wars. They raised three daughters while moving from one duty station to the next, until his retirement from the Air Force at the rank of major in 1965 and kept going through his second career – 20 years in the civil service, inspecting Air National Guard units and teaching classes on bio-chemical war defense.

Years later, Durkin would face an entirely different battle. After being diagnosed with prostate cancer, he learned that radiation therapy was his best weapon against this new enemy. After an initial hesitation, he started it and kept going.

He’s now cancer free and is the namesake for a new program at the Cape Fear Valley Cancer Treatment and Cyberknife Center. The Thomas F. Durkin Veterans Program will help support veterans of all ages who are receiving cancer care.

His name on the program represents not only his own experience as a veteran conquering cancer, but also his passion for volunteering after the end of a remarkable career.

“When he retired, my mom said, ‘Don’t expect to be under my feet,’” his daughter Patty Morgan recalled. “He played golf once a week nearly every week. He played well, too, having three holes-in-one under his belt when he ‘retired’ from the game at 92!”

Durkin also volunteered at the VA weekly.

“He loved visiting ‘his guys’ in long-term care because ‘many



don’t see family or friends,” Morgan said. “He wanted to be there for them. And he was for more than 20 years.”

He has also given his time generously to other causes: delivering Meals on Wheels, offering free tax preparation services for people in need, working with Habitat for Humanity and teaching adult participants in a literacy program.

Volunteering has been a pleasure to Durkin, but it has also echoed his mantra during the quiet retirement years: “You have to keep moving. You just keep going.”

He and Anne both faithfully attended and volunteered for many years at St. Patrick Catholic Church in Fayetteville. They kept going for 68 years in all, until her passing in 2015.

Despite a remarkable life, including feats of daring during wartime, Durkin bristles at the suggestion that he’s a hero. He insists everyone he served with had every bit of the courage and determination that he did, driving trucks, digging ditches or flying planes.

“Tom absolutely refuses to conceive of himself as a hero,” said his son-in-law, Michael Morgan. “It bothers him to no end that people might think of him that way.”

With nearly a century under his belt, Durkin lives independently to this day and doesn’t expect much of a fuss about that either. It’s just what you do – you keep going.