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From Twin Lakes to Iraq and back

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Maj. Frank Kelly of South Salem with his family at their Twin Lakes

home. At back is his wife, Kathleen, and their sons 11-year-old James and 14-year-old Brendan; in the middle row, their 12-year-old daughter, Eileen, Frank, and their 9-year-old son, Liam; and at front, their 6-year-old son, Terence. -Bryan Haeffele photo

## Serving with honor, Kelly returns from 'Triangle of Death' in Iraq

“My road to serving in Iraq started on Sept. 11, 2001,” said U.S. Army Reserve Maj. Frank Kelly, who recently returned home to the Twin Lakes section of South Salem after 12 months of active duty in the notorious “Triangle of Death.”

Shortly before the events of Sept. 11, Mr. Kelly, a trial lawyer, had made the decision to leave the Army Reserve after 10 years of service.

“I had already completed missions in Guatemala, Belize and Korea, and my wife, Kathleen, and I had just had our youngest child,” he said. “I hadn’t put in the ‘retirement’ paperwork quite yet, and when the Sept. 11 attacks happened, I never did.”

Mr. and Mrs. Kelly are both New York City natives who have lived in Lewisboro for 12 years. The couple has five children, 14-year-old Brendan, 12-year-old Eileen, 11-year-old James, 9-year-old Liam, and 6-year-old Terence.

### Called up

The 45-year-old Mr. Kelly said he had always been a “big believer” in national public service. He enlisted in the Army Reserve right after completing law school.

“I have always believed in doing my duty for my country, but the events of 9/11 were a kind of special clarion call to me,” he said. “I regarded it as my generation’s Pearl Harbor and knew I would be needed to serve in the Middle East at some point in the future.”

With the prospect of a tour of duty in that area of the world always in the back of their minds, the Kellys continued their day-to-day lives with their large and active family. Mr. Kelly commuted to the city every day but still found time to be active as a sports coach.

“But ever since Sept. 11, the possibility of his going at any time was

always there for me,” Ms. Kelly said. “I felt I had to not show my anxiety and keep things going along smoothly for the sake of the children.”

Mr. Kelly was less anxious.

“I had the training and was more concerned about the effects of going there on my family than on me,” he said. “I knew what I would have to do and was ready and willing to do it.”

Finally, on June 11, 2006, Mr. Kelly was mobilized.

“After waiting and wondering, it was almost a relief to finally be called,” he said. “I had been putting a lot of things in my life and career on hold and this provided a resolution.”

Mr. Kelly left New York at 4 a.m. on June 14, flying out of Stewart Air Force Base and bound for basic training stateside. Despite the early hour, Ms. Kelly and all five children drove with him to the airport.

“The children were very upset,” Ms. Kelly said. “It was not a pleasant experience or one I would ever want to relive.”

### **In Iraq**

After training at Fort McCoy in Wisconsin for six weeks, Mr. Kelly was sent to Kuwait in late July.

“The day we arrived there it was 140 degrees,” he said. “I got to Iraq in late August. By then the temperature was only 125 degrees. I was stationed in the so-called ‘Triangle of Death’ near Baquba. There were 6,379 men under my command in the 411 Theater Army Engineer Brigade.”

Although Mr. Kelly was deployed at the rank of major, he did his share of active combat duty.

“Part of our assignment was to find and defuse improvised explosive devices, the notorious IEDs,” he said. “These are the most dangerous things in Iraq. They are so deadly the only way you can deal with your daily routine is to adopt a fatalistic attitude.”

Mr. Kelly said the overwhelming day-to-day dangers, coupled with the

harsh living conditions, could exact a heavy toll.

“I slept in a helmet and 65-pound vest every night,” he said. “There were plenty of nights with rockets exploding overhead and windows blowing in. I know it’s hard to understand, but you can’t worry about what’s going to happen next. We lost 15 people in my unit.”

Mr. Kelly said he had some “close calls,” including being knocked down by a rocket, but managed to escape physically intact.

Back at home, Ms. Kelly was the one who worried.

“It was an everyday thing that never went away,” she said. “When we spoke, he wasn’t allowed to tell me where he was or what he was doing, just that he was fine.”

Mr. Kelly said the family used a videophone to keep his healthy image before the children.

“They could see that I really was fine and that helped a lot,” he said.  
Determination

When asked about the attitude of other soldiers serving in Iraq, Mr. Kelly said that it was “very positive.”

“The soldiers there have a great attitude,” he said. “They are there because they want to be there. It’s an all-volunteer army of well-trained, high-functioning individuals. A lot of what is reported at home about low morale is not true. The insurgents are very dangerous but do not impede what we do. They cannot take our army down. We view them as thugs and rebels and deal with them on that level.”

Mr. Kelly said soldiers were forced to divorce themselves from political considerations.

“There is a huge dichotomy between being a soldier and being a politician or commentator,” he said. “We realize that this is a fight that is not going to go away anytime soon. It already goes back thousands of years and there is no easy solution. Americans want fast results, but this will be an intergenerational struggle.”

Mr. Kelly said he believed the Iraq government would be able to gain control of the country over time, but it will not be quick.

“Right now, they still need the umbrella of our protection,” he said. “But there is hope for the future. Don’t forget they have spent the last 35 years living under a brutal dictator and before that were oppressed by others. They still don’t know how to be free, but they will learn.”

Mr. Kelly said he was especially heartened by the gains political freedom would bring to the women of Iraq.

“Under the old ways, they are little more than chattel,” he said “All that will change and has already started, with the construction of special schools and a health care center just for women.”

### **Back home**

After his yearlong tour of duty Mr. Kelly arrived home in early August and took the month to spend with family and friends. He was awarded the Bronze Star for his service and is still in the reserves but cannot be deployed for six years.

He said when he came home, he was overwhelmed, sometimes to the point of tears, by the warm and emotional reception he received from the community.

His house is still festooned with yellow ribbons, signs, and flags, and inside a huge “Welcome Home” banner stretches from one end of the living room to the other.

“I am very touched, and somewhat embarrassed, when people, sometimes complete strangers, come up to me and express their gratitude,” he said. “Political leanings don’t seem to enter into it much at all. Everyone thanks me for serving.”

Mr. Kelly said he was grateful to have survived the Iraq experience and proud to have done his duty.

“While I was there, I did it to the best of my ability,” he said. “I think the fact that I am 45 years old was a big benefit to me and the young men under my command. I was something of a father figure to them and was able to talk to them and calm them down when things got really tough. Sometimes it was not so much about being an officer as it was about being a surrogate dad. Maturity and having my own family really helped.”

Mr. Kelly said if he had to choose one word to sum up his attitude to the entire experience it would be “honor.”

“If you are an honorable individual and pursue your duties and goals in an honorable way, it will come out all right,” he said. “Honor is the lifeblood of serving in the military. It is the foundation of duty and earns our young men and women the respect they all deserve.”

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