

MEMORIAL DAY TRIBUTE

A SPECIAL TO THE LEADER

MAY 27, 2010

INSIDE

A QUEST TO BRING UNCLE JOHNNY HOME

TRIBUTES TO THE COUNTY'S SERVICE MEMBERS

MEMORIAL DAY PROGRAM



A quest to bring Uncle Johnny home

His plane was shot down in the Burmese jungle in 1943 and now, nearly 67 years later, his family hopes to bring his remains home

By TIFFANY HOLLAND
tholland@covingtonleader.com

On a plot of land near the small village of Birmani Kami in India lies an unmarked field of ginger. Unthought for many years by anything other than the morning dew that settles in before the sun rises, the ginger field rests far away from any bustle of tourists or sightseers and is known to just mostly local people.

Kept away in its private crevice of the world and protected only by a fence of bamboo and leaves, this field also serves as a burial ground for as many as 50 American soldiers.

One of the soldiers presumably resting in this spot is Covington native John Calvin Kelley. One of the many victims of World War II, his parents would go on to bury an empty coffin. The love of his life would go on to marry another. His brothers and sisters would grow old without him, existing only in their memory.

For 63 years, no one knew where his remains were kept. However, after a recent expedition of a wreck-age explorer, several interested family members who searched tirelessly and a lot of divine intervention, his location has been found.

Before World War II began, John Kelley grew up on his family's farm in Garland. He was born in 1917, the ninth of eleven children to Albert Alonzo and Laura Ellen Kelley.

The people alive today who knew him describe him as having relentless wit, extraordinary charm and a captivating smile. Outgoing and athletic, Kelley excelled at sports. He was a running back on the Byars Hall (now Covington High School) football team and led them to the state tournament in 1938.

He had the nickname "race-horse" from his friends all through school due to his running strength and long legs. Kelley went on to college at The University of Tennessee Junior College in Martin on a football scholarship. He played halfback and was the leading scorer on his team in his sophomore season.

After he graduated from college, like so many young men of his generation, he enlisted in the military to fight with the allied forces in one of the worst wars in world history. Kelly joined the Army and became a bombardier soldier who flew in B-24 planes.

While he was said to have many girlfriends, everyone concedes that his main squeeze and most serious love was his high school sweetheart Martha McDow. Kelly and McDow would write letters to each other while he was away in the war. He sent her several items on his journeys including his bombardier wings that she reportedly wore daily and is seen in several pictures pinned to her chest.

On his last visit home, he told several people he planned on asking her to marry him when he returned from the war.

He sent dozens of letters home to

his family, many of which are still kept in a binder describing his adventures overseas.

One man who met Kelley remembers that after surviving a plane crash in Italy, he packed up his parachute in a briefcase and pretended to be a salesman to avoid being captured.

His morale declined after his original crew in Burma was shot down and killed, which Kelley narrowly avoided. He was sick the day they went out on their last flight. However, he reportedly bonded with his new crew quickly. First Lieutenant Kelley was assigned to the 493rd bomb squadron that was piloted by Major Wesley Werner.

On Nov. 14, 1943, John Kelley climbed into the bombardier compartment of a B-24 headed out of Pandaveswar, India, bound on a mission to bomb a target in central Burma.

It was after the bombs were dropped and the planes were headed back to their base when a large number of Japanese fighter planes attacked them.

The B-24 planes called for help that never came.

After hours of battling in the skies, Kelley's plane crashed in the Burmese jungle. Of the ten man crew, eight survived the crash, but all suffered serious injuries.

Kelley was one of the less severely burned and along with his commanding officer, Werner, who sustained head injuries, went to the wreckage to help out his fallen comrades.

The crew was later discovered by Japanese officials who sent the men to the Rangoon Central Jail, a former civilian British prison in the center of Rangoon, Burma.

It was here that the injured airmen were placed in solitary confinement.

They were given no clothes, no beds, little food and very little medical care.

Several of the fellow prisoners cared for the men including John Boyd. Boyd was with Kelley when he died and would later include Kelley in a book he co-authored.

Kelley was the last of his crew to survive in the jail. He managed to trudge on with his injuries, helping his fellow soldiers, until eventually starvation and infection from his burns set in, since there were no antibiotics given to him.

Boyd said that in his last few hours, Kelley was confused and saw things that were not really there, all signs of an infection.

It was there in this dank, dark cell, thousands of miles away from his home in Garland, Tennessee, that John Kelley breathed his last breath. He was 26 years old.

His fellow prisoners of war made a secret map of where they buried the bodies. When the men were liberated, this map was given to the American Graves Registration Service.

In 1946, a recovery team was sent to retrieve the soldier's bodies from this site and bring them back to the states.

However, the plane never made it back. It was assumed it had crashed but to no one knew for sure.

That is, until recently.

American Clayton Kuhles is a businessman who explores Southeast Asia for wreckage sites, combining his love of travel and World War II history. On Nov. 5, 2009 he discovered the remains of the C-47 plane sent to retrieve the bodies near the town of Birmani



Top left, John Kelley, right, and crewmates are pictured in B-24 bomber during World War II. The plane was later shot down and, after dying as a prisoner of war, Kelley's remains are buried in India. Top right, Kelley in his uniform. Next, Kelley and his crew pose for a group photo. Center left, Kelley and girlfriend Martha McDow, to whom he hoped to marry. Center right, Kelley's remains are believed to be buried under what is now a field of ginger. Above, inside the Rangoon jail where Kelley died. Photos courtesy Leslie Roane

Kami in India.

The local villagers shared the oral story of the plane that they had found when it was still burning. The many bodies inside of it were buried in an impromptu cemetery, now covered in ginger.

Every year the native people hold a memorial service for the soldiers even though they are unknown to them.

Several members of John Kelley's family have recently tried to find out what happened to their long, lost relative and they were led to Kuhles for their answers.

At the Kelley family reunion, held in Burlington in 2007, two of John's nieces, Leslie Roane and Susan Krall were taken back by John Kelley's handsome looks and the little information that other fam-

ily members had on him.

Kelley's niece, Theta Roane, had previously dug up letters he had written and historical information to find what had happened to his body, but not much could be found.

Two years after the reunion, after searching through dozens of archives and contacting people all over the country, the two women found the answer they were seeking.

During this process they attempted to contact his former girlfriend Martha McDow, who never knew what happened to him, only to find out she had passed away in February 2009.

However, Leslie Roane was able to meet her children who said that their mother had talked of Kelley several times and she had passed