

454th True Stories

Lucky Bell



B-24 'Club 400' memories

15th Air Force 304 Bomb Wing 454th BG 736th sqd

454th

www.454thbombgroup.it

The “Lucky Little Bell of San Michele”

During World War II my father-in-law, John Kelly, enlisted in the Army Air Corps. He became a navigator-radio man assigned to a B24-Bomber called the “Club 400.” He and his crew were stationed at Giovanni Army Airfield, Italy, where they arrived on the 8th of March, 1944. They replaced a crew that was lost in a bombing raid over the Ploesti Oil Fields, Romania.

“Club 400” was part of the 736th Bomb Squadron of the 454th Bombardment Group. Jack’s crew flew 50 missions over the Ploesti Oil Field and other target locations. Over 300 planes were lost. Each plane had a crew of 9 and a “tail end Charlie,” a kid with a camera trying to take pictures of the hits. Nobody was expected to come back alive thru 50 missions.

After many missions in July of 1944 the “Club 400” was shot up with flak, which are pieces of shrapnel. The crew was ordered to a Capri Rest Camp for 7 days of rest and relaxation (r/r). The Isle of Capri is an island off of the coast of Italy. It is on the southern side of the Gulf of Naples. This is where the crews were sent to get a little peace and hopefully some rest from their harrowing experiences. The monks on the island gave little silver bells to the crews upon their arrival. The bells all had 4 leaf clovers and were inscribed with the words, ‘The Lucky Little Bell of San Michele.’ The bells were worn on the crew flight jackets and were believed to bring them luck...

Jack wore his Lucky Little Bell for the rest of his missions until the 8th of July, 1945, when the 454th left to return to the United States. V-E Day brought an end to the war in Europe. On September 8th, 1945, Jack returned to civilian life and tried to live a normal life again.

My father-in-law never talked much about his years in the war because they were more than likely too painful. He never told us anything about the tiny “Little Bell of San Michele.” The first time I saw this little bell was in 2009, when we brought it home in a small box with some of his medals. This was 40 years after his death and 64 years after the end of WWII in Europe.

I wanted to know more about this little bell. What was it? Why was it in a box with all of his other medals? Researching, I found out that San Michele is Italian for St. Michael the Archangel. There is also a legend that goes along with this little bell. It is about a little Shepherd boy who lived in a small hut on the Isle of Capri. He and his mother were very poor. They lived on the slopes of Mount Solaro and all they had was one tiny lamb. The boy would graze his little lamb high on the mountain slope.

One evening the boy was picking flowers to bring home to his mother. He realized it was getting late, but when he turned around he could not see his little lamb. He thought about his mother and how she would worry about him if he did not return. What would happen to her without him? In the distance he could hear a bell ringing. Rushing off in haste, he found his lamb and gathered her up to bring home.

Just as he came to the edge of a great cliff a huge bright light stopped him. There, upon a gold beam sitting on a white horse, was St. Michael the Archangel. He was wearing a necklace with a silver bell. Taking the necklace off and giving it to the boy, St. Michael said these words, “Take this with you and wear it. Always follow the sound and it will keep you from harm.” The boy went home filled with wonder and joy. Forever after his life was filled with happiness.

On the spot of this apparition a church and Villa were built, called San Michele. I believe this bell is lucky and I believe my father-in-law made it through his remaining missions because of his deep faith in God and the protection of St. Michael.

In 1969, while we were expecting our first child, my father-in-law asked me what we were naming our baby. He was so excited because he was going to be a grandfather for the first time. He had four sons and no daughters, so I felt especially close to him. I told him that if it was a boy we were going to name him after him, which made him happy. Right away he wanted to know what name we had picked for a girl. "Michelle" was my answer. He looked shocked and said "of all the names in the whole world why that one?" I said without hesitation, "because of the Beatles song "Michelle My Belle!" Dad never said a word. After Michelle was born, certain he did not like that name we began calling her "Shelly." He loved her so much and nicknamed her "Shelly Belly." Today Shelly has the "Tiny Little Bell of San Michele" and Dad's secret is revealed after all these years: our daughter was Michelle his Belle.

St. Michael's silver bell was given as a gift from the Isle of Capri to President Harry Truman during the Second World War. The bell arrived on the President's desk a few minutes before the announcement of Germany's surrender and it happened to be the first bell in the world to ring the end of the war in Europe. The "Lucky Bell of San Michele" is now kept with President Truman's memorabilia in the U.S.A. National Archives.

Sherry Kelly



B-24 41-28808 'Club 400'

under the plane standing top left to right John F. Kelly(Jack), James (Hutch) Ledbetter, Helmer Carlson, Ray Running, Mike Murray, Thomas Robinson.
front kneeling left to right Meron Ananian (Pete), Roy Hake, H.M. Sinclair

2nd Lt. Roy Hake	Pilot
2nd Lt. Gail Moffat	Co-Pilot
2nd Lt. H.M. Sinclair	Navigator
2nd Lt. Meron Ananian	Bombardier
Sgt. Helmer Carlson	E
Sgt. John F. Kelly	ROG
S/Sgt. Ray Running	AG
T/Sgt. James Ledbetter	BG
S/Sgt. Thomas Robinson	BG
Sgt. Michael Murray	BG





Mascot "Jackie" for the 'Club 400'



This was given to my husband in 2008 when his Mother Lorrette Kelly came to visit us. She told me that she gave it to my husbands Dad just after my husband was born. In July of 1944. Jackie is really ruff-but he has been through hell like the guys of the Club 400. He has a slit across his face where the stuffing shows. In the picture it looks like a puff of smoke. Could it have been shrapnel? Could it been caused by a bullet? Nobody knows anymore. I have no-one left to ask. I am amazed he still exists. Most people would consider him trash and he would have been pitched along time ago. He is special, if only he could talk. What a story he could tell! He is a part of history and we treasure him.

Sherry and Jack Kelly