

Sergeant Charles E. Kelly 23-year-old winner of the Congressional Medal of Honor, sits with a generous supply of guns somewhere in Italy. (Apparently he poses with the weapons he used...) © Bettmann/Corbis

It was September 14, 1943, in the house of the mayor of the village of Altavilla, 20 miles from Salerno in Italy. What 22-year-old Private Charles Kelly did that day made him famous, the first soldier in the European Theater to be awarded the Medal of Honor. He also earned two Silver Stars and medals of valor from Italy and Great Britain, but he never placed a lot of value on any of them. “These medals will just be a lot of brass after the war, and I’ll just be another ex-soldier,” he said.

He was right about that. The cheering stopped, and the glory did not last.

Charles E. Kelly was born on September 23, 1920, one of nine children who grew up in an old wooden building in an alley in a rundown neighborhood in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The house had no running water, electricity, or toilet, and all nine children bunked in the attic. One reporter called it a “decrepit shack.” Charles dropped out of school and went to work at an early age. He joined the army in 1942, and it soon became apparent that he was not going to be a very good soldier when it came to discipline and obeying orders. He went AWOL once—some sources say twice—and as punishment spent time in the stockade. He liked to brag that nobody ever gave him a Good Conduct Medal.

Once in combat, however, Kelly never got into trouble. He was part of the 36th Division, a Texas National Guard outfit that saw its first action only a few days before Altavilla. Known as the T-Patchers, the division earned the distinction of leading the first invasion of the European continent when it came ashore at Salerno on September 9, 1943.

After the beachhead was established, the Germans counterattacked and recaptured Altavilla. The commanding officer of the 36th Division ordered two battalions forward to retake the town. Private Kelly volunteered to crawl nearly two miles under almost constant German fire to report on the enemy defenses established on a hill just outside of town. Kelly then led a three-man patrol to wipe out a German machine gun nest that was holding up the advance. He killed the machine-gunners with his BAR and confronted up to 70 more German soldiers who were closing in. According to the reports of the other GIs present, Kelly killed at least 40.

By the end of the day, he was sent to the house of Altavilla’s mayor, located in the central square, to help defend the town. When the Germans attacked the next

Commando Kelly’s War

A hero in combat, Charles Kelly battled demons after World War II came to an end.

HE KILLED 40 GERMANS IN LESS THAN AN HOUR. ON THE SECOND DAY HE earned the Medal of Honor for killing more. Commando Kelly did it by becoming a one-man army, holding back scores of German soldiers who surrounded the house where he was trapped with 30 other GIs. He used every weapon he could find—three Browning Automatic Rifles (BARs), a Thompson submachine gun, a Springfield rifle dating from World War I, a carbine, and an M-1 rifle.

“I was fond of guns,” Kelly said. Then he used an antitank gun, a phosphorous grenade, an incendiary grenade, and even threw 60mm mortar shells out of an upper story window to kill more Germans.

After all that, while still under fire, he went downstairs to the kitchen, grabbed four eggs, broke them into his empty C-ration can, and swallowed them raw. He reached for a bottle of champagne and took a drink, then put it down and shot a German sniper up in a tree. Kelly watched him hit the ground. Then he swigged some more champagne. He said it tasted like soda pop.

Caption
(credit)

morning, Kelly stood at a second floor window at the rear of the house and began to fire every weapon he could find.

He started with the Browning. "I worked my BAR so steadily that when I put the next load of cartridges into it, it wouldn't work anymore," he recalled. "I laid it against a bed and went back to get another BAR, but when I came back the bed was on fire. That first gun was so hot that it touched off the sheets and blankets. I worked the new BAR until the steel of the barrel turned reddish-purple with heat and it became warped. I couldn't find another BAR, so I went upstairs and scouted around until I found a Tommy gun with a full magazine. Then I went to the window and gunned for some more Germans."

After the Tommy gun, he found a bazooka and six shells and fired away. Each time the weapon went off, the house shook on its foundation. Then Kelly threw an incendiary grenade, which exploded on the roof of the building from which the Germans were shooting, setting it on fire. Next, he tossed a 60mm mortar shell out the window. It exploded in the middle of a group of five enemy soldiers who were trying to sneak up to the rear of the house, killing them all.

He fired a carbine, but it got too hot to handle, and he had to put it down. "Your mind gets single-tracked in a fight like that," he wrote later, "and all I could think of was the problem of finding another weapon as fast as I used one up, so I could keep on blazing away." After shooting a while longer with an old rifle, he glanced down into the courtyard and noticed a 37mm antitank gun. Kelly raced down the stairs, loaded a shell, and took aim at a church steeple the Germans were using an observation post.

"I didn't know how to fire it, but I kept on fumbling around, pulling this and jerking that, until I got hold of a handle and it went off. Not knowing anything about it, I had my chin too close to it, and the recoil knocked me kicking." He went back to the house and spotted another Browning, nestled in the hands of a dead soldier. He pried it loose, loaded it, and kept firing until it got so hot it started to smoke.

That night, the GIs got orders to pull back. Kelly volunteered to stay behind to give them covering fire as they made their way back to American lines. Shortly thereafter, he was promoted to corporal, then sergeant. He fought in several more major battles, including the ill-fated and costly attempt by the 36th Division to cross the Rapido River. An article about his exploits at Altavilla appeared in the Army newspaper *Stars and Stripes*, referring to him as



A wounded German prisoner is attended to by US medics in Altaville, Italy. Perhaps a casualty of Commando Kelly...

"Commando Kelly." He was approved for the Medal of Honor, and it was awarded on March 11, 1944.

When he returned to the United States a month later, the celebrations began. "Commando Kelly Day" was proclaimed in his home town of Pittsburgh. Adulation and acclaim followed him on a 60-day nationwide war bond tour. "I'll be glad when it's over," he said. "You sure are like a monkey in a cage when you're on a spot like this."

The trip was hectic, traveling from one city to the next, night after night. "Five speeches a day," he said, "sell War Bonds and say nice things about the 37-millimeter gun. And they give you six bucks a day for expenses. But we were in trouble in the war and had to build morale. They needed heroes, that's all."

The money rolled in. Twentieth-Century Fox paid Kelly \$25,000 for his life story to be the basis for a movie, an amount equivalent to \$325,000 today. *The Saturday Evening Post* magazine paid him \$15,000 for an article on his exploits. Job offers and business opportunities mounted from all around the country. Whatever he wanted he could have had.

Commando Kelly was wealthy beyond his wildest dreams and had opportunities few people would ever have, but it turned out that he was much better at war than peace. Once the celebrations were over, his life sped downhill. The money went first. He spent liberally, even during his war bond tour, treating people to drinks and meals. He flew home to see his family every weekend, paying for the trips himself. He bought furniture for his mother and lavished cash on his brothers. In a 1957 interview

with journalist Mike Wallace, Kelly said, "If I have something, I always want to give it to somebody else. I'll give anybody the shirt off my back."

On March 11, 1945, one year after he received the Medal of Honor, Kelly married Mae Francis Boish, a cashier in a restaurant. They bought a house in Pittsburgh and a gas station to operate but sold the station at a loss two years later. Kelly had gotten increasingly restless going to work at the same place and doing the same thing every day. He could not take it.

Kelly was not alone in finding it hard to adjust to civilian life after the war. "The shooting war may be over," General Omar Bradley said, "but the suffering isn't." More than two million veterans did not have jobs as late as 1947, two years after the end of the war. Their rate of unemployment was three times higher than those who had not gone to war. Often their family lives were in shambles as well. American veterans of World War II had the world's highest divorce rate; more than twice as many filed for divorce in the first two years after the war than did non-veterans.

Millions of returning servicemen suffered from severe psychological problems of the type now categorized as PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder). By 1946, more than 10,000 veterans each month were being treated at Veterans Administration (VA) hospitals for neuropsychiatric problems (NP). By the following year, fully half the patients in VA hospitals had been diagnosed as experiencing NP symptoms. Thousands of cases went untreated because it was considered a sign of weakness to admit to



Kelly photographed in Italy

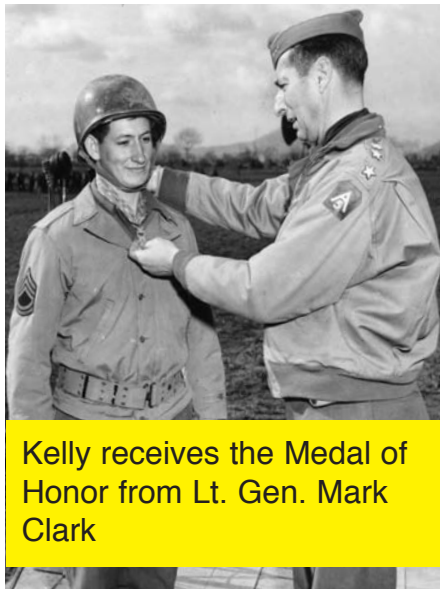
psychological problems. The men were too ashamed to talk about their depression and anxiety, to seek help, or even to confide in their families. But in most cases their loved ones knew something was wrong. They saw how much the men had changed.

A daughter of one World War II veteran remembered how “my parents fought constantly; my father drank constantly. He was seldom happy. Everyone who knew my father before the war said he was never the same.” Another child of a veteran said that her mother had “got engaged to one man, then a different man came home.”

Many veterans were disillusioned, fearful, lonely, and bitter. One man wrote that he felt as if he was “floating in a vacuum of neglect, idleness, and distress.” Veterans often felt they had lost the best years of their lives, years which they would never get back. For others, the nightmares never stopped.

Commando Kelly was one of those who kept his feelings inside. There is no record that he sought help or even expressed the need for it, but he was clearly having difficulties adjusting to civilian life. In 1950, his wife was diagnosed with uterine cancer. She died the following year at the age of 25. Kelly rarely left her side during her illness, caring for her and their two children. That same year, a bank foreclosed on their house. Kelly’s sister Virginia said, “He went out of control after that and was never the same again.”

Kelly took a series of odd jobs as a bodyguard, security guard, construction worker, and house painter, never keeping one for long. In



Kelly receives the Medal of Honor from Lt. Gen. Mark Clark

1952 there was a reprieve of sorts when he was asked to travel the country campaigning for General Dwight D. Eisenhower, the former supreme Allied commander in Europe, who was running for president. At a stop in Louisville, Kentucky, a woman named Betty Gaskins walked up to him, held up a nickel, and said that if he gave her another nickel she would have a dime (the cost of a telephone call), and would be able to call him. Six weeks later they were married.

The new family, with his two children and one of hers from a previous marriage, settled in Pittsburgh, but Kelly again had a hard time finding and keeping a job. They had to pawn her wedding ring to pay bills. They moved to her hometown of Louisville, where her uncle hired Kelly for his construction company, but they had so little money they had to take a small apartment in public housing for a monthly rent of \$23. Kelly had to live at a construction site 50 miles away because he could not afford the gas for the commute. In 1956, he lost that job. The family had grown to six children, and he had no way to support them.

“When you’re in combat,” Kelly said in an interview that year, “you have a job to do, you know how to do it, and you know you can do it. But these years have been rough. Your hands are tied. You have a thing to do, but you can’t do it. You go in and ask a man for a job. It’s a job you never had before, and you’re asking for it, but you don’t know if you can do it. And you get so many ‘No’s.’

“Then there’s your family. You give the kids cereal in the morning, and they ask you for more, and there isn’t any more. When you tell them, you don’t feel like much of a man.”

The story of Kelly’s plight became public;

newspapers throughout the country ran stories about him. Donations of money, furniture, and clothing poured in, along with more than 100 job offers. Kelly accepted a job in St. Louis, Missouri, as a buyer for a scrap iron company. The owner arranged financial assistance so Kelly could buy an eight-bedroom house for his family. The house was worth \$25,000 (equivalent to more than \$200,000 today), but Kelly quit before the family even had a chance to move in.

The governor of Kentucky, A. B. “Happy” Chandler, arranged a job for Kelly as an inspector in the State Highway Department; the monthly pay was \$340. He kept that position for five years until one day in April 1961, when he called his wife to say that he was going to Cuba to fight Fidel Castro. He promised to set up a trust fund for her and the children but added that she should not try to find him.

Kelly never went home again. For 15 years neither Betty nor the children had any idea of his whereabouts. Betty divorced him and raised the children on her own. “We got the short end of the stick of what we had of our dad,” his daughter later said. Kelly drank more heavily, took whatever temporary work he could find, and moved around from California to Texas to the East Coast. In Washington, D.C., he was in a traffic accident, struck by a car and hospitalized for almost a year with a skull fracture and broken legs.

In 1984, after 40 years of heavy drinking and hard living, Commando Kelly died alone in a Pittsburgh VA hospital, where he was being treated for kidney and liver failure. He had taken the bus there and told the admitting clerk that he had no living relatives, even though five of his brothers were nearby. He chose to die alone. He deliberately pulled the tubes from his body that were helping him stay alive. He was 64 years old. No one knows what happened to his medals.

Duane Schultz is a psychologist who has written a dozen military history books including Into the Fire: The Most Fateful Mission of World War II and Crossing the Rapido: A Tragedy of World War II. His most recent book is The Fate of War: Fredericksburg, 1862. He is currently working on a book on the Marine Raiders of World War II.