

LOVING THOSE

WHO HAVE GONE BEFORE US

By Ryan Kelly

A man I've never met has recently shaped my life. His name is Jerry Kelly, and he's my great-uncle. Jerry served as an American pilot in World War II. On October 20, 1944, he was flying a close-support mission over Germany when his plane was hit by anti-aircraft fire. After he radioed that he had smoke in the cockpit, his plane began losing altitude and was last seen disappearing into a cloud.

Sixty-nine years later, as I was reading the 19th-century journal of my great-great-great-grandfather, I came across an entry in which he expressed the hope that his descendants would "not forget the dead." As I pondered these words, I thought of Jerry, because in many ways he had been forgotten. Our family knew a few details about him, but only one story

Our lives are changed as we come to know and love family members who have passed on.

about Jerry had been passed down: during the time he was listed as missing in action, his mother sometimes cooked a plate of food and left it on the kitchen table, just in case Jerry returned while the family was out.

Jerry Looked Just like Me

As I thought about how Jerry was only 20 years old when he died, I realized that he had no direct descendants

to pass on the story of his life to future generations. A strong spiritual impression came to my mind: Jerry's story needs to be preserved. He deserves to be remembered.

I had never seen a photo of Jerry, so the first step in my journey was to find one. I called the Granite School District in Utah, where Jerry had attended high school. They had old yearbooks in a basement vault, so I visited them the next day. On page 96 of the 1942 Granite High School yearbook, I saw Jerry for the first time. Something happened inside me when I saw his photo. He suddenly became a real person, with familiar family features and an entire life ahead of him. When I shared the photo with my family, my aunt said, "Ryan, he looks just like you." That day I determined to learn as much as I could about Jerry.

Jerry Kelly, spring 1944 ►



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I searched newspaper articles and military records and found several important documents. A 1942 newspaper article showed a picture of Jerry presenting the senior class gift at his high school graduation. The Missing Air Crew Report for Jerry's plane included details about where the plane was shot down in Germany. Another newspaper article, written in 1949, announced Jerry's memorial service and revealed that his body wasn't returned to his home in Salt Lake City until five years after his death. Information on [FamilySearch.org](https://www.familysearch.org) indicated that also during 1949, Jerry received his temple endowment by proxy and was sealed to his parents.

But there was yet more for me to learn about Jerry. I wrote a brief essay for my family in which I shared what I had learned. My mom and dad were touched while reading the essay and suggested that I send it to my great-aunt Ruth, Jerry's only sister, who lives in California. She wrote back:

"Ryan, your essay touched my heart. You have found details that I did not know. Jerry was a special person. He was smart, a straight-A student, very funny, and life-loving. At our 50th high school reunion, we were asked what event at Granite High we remembered most. One woman said, 'The day we learned that Jerry Kelly was missing in action.'

Jerry made an impression on a lot of people."

My dad and I later visited Ruth in California. She shared stories about Jerry and also about my grandfather, who died nine years before I was born. During our visit, Ruth revealed that she had saved all the letters Jerry



***The "Three Musketeers":
(left to right) Jerry Kelly, Don Evans,
and Bob Sharp***

wrote to his family during the war—150 letters full of memories written in his beautiful handwriting. The last letter was written only seven days before his death.

Ruth was kind enough to let me borrow the letters. Through them, I came to know and admire Jerry. The letters were a window into his life as a fighter pilot. They were also a window into his soul. In a letter dated July 20, 1943, Jerry wrote the following in response to his grandmother, who had written to remind him to live gospel standards:

"If ever there was a place where a fellow could lose his ideals, this is it. But I'm trying hard and succeeding too, I think. I'm not letting these fellows around here lower my standards. I know what is right and wrong and I'll stick by it no matter what."

In his letters, Jerry showed special love and concern for his mom. In one letter to her, he wrote: "I'm a pretty dog-gone lucky guy to have a family like I've got. That old stuff of absence makes the heart grow fonder is just about right. You did real well with my brother and sister, Mom, and I only hope I can be worthy of them and you and Pop. I'm mighty proud of Gene and Ruth.

I wish we could all be together again, if only for just a little while."

A Forgotten Journal and the "Three Musketeers"

The letters opened another door in my journey. They revealed that Jerry had three close friends: Cliff Lawrence, Bob Sharp, and Don Evans. I had no idea if they were still alive. If they were, they'd be over 90 years old.

I found the address of a Cliff Lawrence living in Bountiful, Utah. After writing him a letter, I was thrilled to receive a phone call confirming that he was the same Cliff mentioned in Jerry's letters. I visited Cliff and his wife in their home, and he told me about

the day he and Jerry went together to volunteer for military service.

And then something amazing happened. Cliff's wife handed me a small journal and asked me to open it. As I did, I saw the name "Jerry Kelly" written on the cover page. I was holding a journal written by Jerry in 1942. She had stumbled across the journal only a few days earlier while cleaning out a drawer. She and Cliff had no memory of ever seeing the journal before, but somehow it had been preserved for more than 70 years. It seemed to me that the Spirit—and perhaps Jerry himself (from the other side of the veil)—was guiding me in my efforts.

After much research and persistence, I made contact with Bob Sharp, who lives in California. I flew to California and had a wonderful visit with Bob and his wife. He showed me photos of Jerry and shared inspiring stories that demonstrated Jerry's Christlike character.

Bob flew in another plane on Jerry's final mission. As they taxied next to each other on the runway, their eyes met and Jerry waved goodbye to Bob. It was the last time they would see each other in this life. He told me not a day has passed when he hasn't thought about Jerry.

At the end of our visit, Bob made us some root beer floats. I remembered that Jerry wrote about how he and Bob would finish each day at flight school by drinking root beer floats together. Tears filled my eyes,

and I had the feeling that Jerry was there with us.

Bob told me about Don Evans, who served with Bob and Jerry in the same flight squadron. The three of them were all Mormons from Utah and were known as the "Three Musketeers." Bob said that Don had passed away in 1999 but that his son Ken was writing a book on his dad's service in World War II and would love to talk to a member of Jerry's family. Ken and I have become good friends as we have worked together to learn more about the "Three Musketeers." Ken told me that when his dad served as a stake president, he would share stories about Jerry in Church talks. The stories showed that Jerry was an example of following the Savior rather than the crowd.

Jerry's Name Lives On

From these meetings, I learned another fact that increased my respect for my great-uncle. Cliff and Bob had each named a son after Jerry, as did my own grandfather. All three men did this to ensure they would never forget him.

The author visits Jerry's grave.



I will always be grateful for my journey that led me to my great-uncle Jerry. This journey was not just about learning details of a person's life. It was about learning to know and love a family member—and the journey has changed me.

Those who have gone before us can still greatly bless our lives, but only if we don't forget them. My great-uncle Jerry has now become one of my most powerful role models.

Like Jerry, many people who lived on this earth never married or never had children. They have no direct descendants to honor their memory. We need to learn their stories so they can be told. Like those who have descendants, they too deserve to be remembered.

Coming to know and love this member of my family has given new meaning to the scriptural promise, "And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers" (Malachi 4:6).

On July 16, 2014, our family visited Jerry's grave in the Salt Lake City cemetery to celebrate his 90th birthday. We talked about how we've been shaped by this family member we've never met. Jerry may be gone, but he is not forgotten.

I believe he is grateful to be remembered. ■

The author lives in Utah, USA.

Use the "Memories" feature on [FamilySearch.org](https://www.familysearch.org) to preserve stories, photos, letters, journals, and other items related to those who have gone before you.