

1945 July 9-15

Soldiers' Lucky Charms

Athletes are well-known for being a superstitious bunch. If a certain pre-game ritual, meal, or talisman is associated with a win, they will continue to believe in the power of that thing to provide luck. They will stick with it until the winning streak ends and then search for a new lucky charm.

Soldiers in war are in life and death situations where any outside power or help thought to aid survival is welcome. Their lucky charms might have been a photo of a loved one, a rabbit's foot, a four-leaf clover, a Christian cross, or any of hundreds of other items. Some airplanes, ships, or even units were deemed lucky or unlucky based on their combat experiences.

The July 15, 1945 edition of the *La Crosse Tribune* tells how Lt. Joseph Kelly relied on a football shirt from Aquinas High School as his lucky charm during 23 bombing missions.

13 Not Superstitious For One Local Aviator; He Feels Any Day Spent At Home A Lucky One

First Lieut. Joseph Kelly visited the *La Crosse Tribune* Friday the 13th. In spite of his aversion for this "unlucky" number, he feels any day is a lucky day at home.

Since he went overseas in November, 1944, to fly with the 15th Air Force in Italy, he's had plenty of opportunity to see superstition in action.

Everything went wrong on the plane's 113th sortie as anyone who has had any trouble with that number might suspect. Adding hazard to the flight were three men of the crew who were flying their 13th missions. Then, as if to insure themselves for trouble, the crew took pictures before they left on the mission. This is strictly taboo, and the combined bad omens proved themselves on the flight.

On Band Luck Trip

The sortie was to Lentz, Austria, and the bad luck came in the loss of two and one-half of the four



—Tribune Photo

LIEUT JOSEPH KELLY

engines. One was on the way up and the others konked out over the target.

But there must have been some good luck in there pulling for pulling for them too, because the crew all came back safely and the plane had only one flak hole in spite of having to drop out of the formation. Two P-38s escorted them back and chased off two of the enemy's 109's. But when they reached their base, the fighter pilots told them the 38's had been

photo reconnaissance planes and had had no guns. It would seem that at that point in the war, even the sight of fighter planes put the Germans to flight.

Kelly carried his Irishman's luck on his back. On the first of his 23 missions he wore a football T-shirt that he used in Aquinas games during high school. The first mission was successful, so he continued to wear the "lucky" shirt on the rest of his missions over Austria, Hungary, Italy, Germany and Czechoslovakia. The combination of a good crew, good plane, and good luck brought them all through their missions without casualty.

Enlisted In 1942

On Dec. 5, 1942, Kelly enlisted in the army air corps. Shortly after his 14 months of cadet training he shipped overseas. It was a 10-day boat ride going over, and an eight-day plane trip when he returned to the States. Though the flight back seems long by comparison, the route included Dakar, Africa, Natal, Brazil and Georgetown, British Guiana.

Kelly flew with the 739th Squadron of the 454th Bombardment Group and earned the air medal with two clusters, the ETO ribbon with stars for the battles of the Appennines, Po valley, Germany and Balkans. After a 34-day leave he will report July 25 at Camp Grant, Ill., for reassignment. He is the son of Mr. and Mrs. A. E. Kelly, 416 South 21st street.

(*La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 July 15, page 3)

What really determines whether a person survives a war? Skill and experience help, but those qualities are no guarantee when life or death depends on so many variables. When thousands of men invade a beach, why do bullets hit some and not others? When hundreds of aircraft are on a mission over enemy territory, why are some hit and destroyed while others survive? In a naval battle, some men escape from a sinking ship while others never have a chance to save themselves.

During any war, there are countless stories of how fate or luck made the difference between life and death. One man is sick, so another one volunteers to take his place on an aircraft that never returns. A man stops for a cup of coffee and avoids being killed when a Japanese kamikaze plows into his usual duty station. Bullets miss by inches, while others follow a narrow trajectory that kills instantly. Artillery shells impact in the exact spot that man was standing on just seconds before.

Is it fate, luck, divine intervention? Why do these work in favor of some and not others?

Only one thing is certain; cemeteries and seas around the world are full of people for whom their lucky charms did not work. We never hear their stories.

Jeff Rand
Adult Services Librarian
La Crosse Public Library
jrand@lacrosselibrary.org