

## William Michael Kelly (1926-2020) SM2 Plankowner, Survivor of April 16, 1945 Attack in Okinawa



**Bill Kelly SM2** is the hero that retrieved the national ensign from the main deck that was knocked down by a Japanese Kamikaze. A wounded shipmate was laying outside of the wardroom with his leg blown off. He asked Bill, who was on his way back up to the signal bridge with the flag, if he could have it. Bill gave him the flag and he died clutching the flag to his chest. From Sonny Walker: "Bill was quite a guy and it was a pleasure to have known him. He passed quietly with some family members with him." **Obituary** William M. Kelly, 94 of Point Pleasant passed away peacefully on January 10, 2020 at Crest Pointe Care Center, Point Pleasant. His former wife and friend Lillian Kelly was at his side. Bill was born in Kearny and was a lifelong resident of the shore area. He attended Manasquan High School where he received a varsity letter playing football. World War II began, and Bill left high school to enlist in the US Navy. He was assigned to the USS Laffey," The ship that would not die". Bill received his "Purple Heart Medal" during the historic battle that lasted 80 minutes aboard the USS Laffey. After his service Bill returned to New Jersey and delivered milk until he opened Shamrock Janitorial Services, Belmar. Bill was an avid golfer, enjoyed boating and his horses.

Bill was predeceased by his parents Joseph and Bessie Kelly, his brothers James and Thomas Kelly and a sister Marion Hirsch. He is survived by his children, son Michael T. Kelly of Brick, four daughters and their spouses Maureen A. Kelly of Tucson, AZ, Mary Wirtz and her husband James of Martha's Vineyard, Margie

Moore and her husband Kenny of Wall, NJ and Monica Bleiler and her husband Keith of Falmouth, MA. Bill was also the grandfather of thirteen and great grandfather of eight. The family would like to thank the nurses and staff of Crest Pointe Care Center for their dedicated care over the years. Family and friends are invited to attend a memorial visitation on Monday, January 13, 2020 from 12 to 2 pm at Orender Family Home for Funerals 2643 Old Bridge Road Manasquan, NJ with a funeral service to begin at 1:30 pm. In lieu of flowers, memorial donations may be made to the USS Laffey at <https://www.patriotspoint.org/explore/uss-laffey/>. To send condolences to the family please visit [www.orenderfamilyhome.com](http://www.orenderfamilyhome.com).

**Bill Kelly 93rd Birthday Celebration.** In January 2018 USS Laffey Association President Chris Kirhagis and Past President Sonny Walker had the opportunity to drive to New Jersey to meet with Laffey Plank Owner Bill Kelly in celebration for his 93rd birthday. In attendance were numerous family & friends. NJ Congressman (R) Chris Smith was also there to present Bill with the Laffey's US Flag that had been recovered during the Okinawa Battle on April 16, 1945. Bill recovered the flag. A severely injured shipmate asked to hold the flag. The shipmate died holding the flag. This flag had been flown over the Nation's Capitol Building prior to its presentation. Congressman Smith also presented Bill with a Proclamation recognizing his involvement of this infamous battle.

At 94 years old, Bill Kelly is the last surviving plank owner of the USS Laffey commissioning crew. He enlisted in the US Navy on December 29, 1942. He went the Naval Training Station, Great Lakes, Illinois for boot camp. He then went the Naval Radio Operator School for training. He reported to the USS Laffey as a Signalman Striker. He was promoted to Signalman 3<sup>rd</sup> Class. He was aboard the USS Laffey for the Commissioning Ceremony with Capt Becton Commanding Officer on February 8, 1945. He was aboard for the Normandy Invasion and the 16 April 1944 Okinawa Kamikaze attack. After his honorable discharge on November 13, 1945, Bill .....

We are all honored and appreciative of Bill's service to the US Navy and the USS Laffey Association.

		
<p>Bill Kelly 1945</p>	<p>Mark Anderson, Bill Kelly and Mary Ann Kelly 2000 at USS Laffey Reunion in Charleston SC</p>	<p>Bill Kelly in retirement 2015</p>

### Bill Kelly Flag Ceremony

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Per Congressman Smith (R-NJ) <https://chrissmith.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=400851>

“Congressman Smith (R-NJ) presented an American flag flown over the U.S. Capitol to Bill Kelly, a 93 year-old U.S. Navy veteran and hero of the U.S.S. Laffey during World War II, on his birthday this week. Kelly was joined by his family

members, local Wall Township Committeeman Kevin Orender, and members of the U.S.S. Laffey Association.

“‘Bill’ Kelly’s brave, selfless and outstanding service to this nation aboard the U.S.S. Laffey stands as a shining example of the best our country has to offer,” Smith stated.

Kelly was born in Belmar, NJ in 1925, and was a high school football star at Manasquan High School, before enlisting in the U.S. Navy in 1942 at the age of 17, at the height of World War II.

He served on the U.S.S. Laffey, known as “The Ship That Would Not Die.” The Laffey assisted U.S. forces at the D-Day invasion of Normandy in 1944, before journeying to the Pacific theatre of the war. At the Battle of Okinawa, Kelly was awarded the Purple Heart Medal for wounds he received in battle on board the ship on April 16, 1945, when the Laffey endured a large-scale kamikaze air attack by Japanese planes.

According to the executive director of Patriots Point in South Carolina, where the Laffey is now moored, in the midst of the April 16 air attack Kelly jumped to the deck of the ship to retrieve the American Flag which had fallen; he encountered a dying comrade who requested to hold the flag, and Kelly wrapped him in the flag.

“As a community, we deeply appreciate all that Bill has done, both here in New Jersey and across the globe, to make the world a better place for all, especially and including his children, grandchildren, great grandchildren and those yet to come,” Smith said.

“Bill truly embodies the character of ‘The Greatest Generation,’ and we are grateful and honored to pay tribute to his remarkable contributions.”

Kelly is one of only four surviving crew members to have served on the Laffey during the Battle of Okinawa. He was honorably discharged from the Navy in November of 1945. He has five children and 13 grandchildren, some of who were present for the flag presentation.”

[Click on this link to view photos of the Flag Ceremony](#)

Send Comments/Corrections to [president@laffey.org](mailto:president@laffey.org) and [webmaster@laffey.org](mailto:webmaster@laffey.org)