

COL. ARTHUR MARTONE INDUCTED INTO THE NEW JERSEY AVIATION HALL OF FAME

# A Lifetime in the Sky

BY PATRICK REILLY  
THE COAST STAR

When Colonel Arthur Martone was forced to eject from his burning P-40 fighter jet behind Nazi enemy lines in Italy in 1944, he had only two thoughts: that of his safety, and of his mother who would be receiving a "Missing in Action" notice from the Air Force.

Nursing an injured leg "that swelled to the size of a bowling ball," Col. Martone, struggling to make himself inconspicuous to the enemy who he expected to have seen him eject from his aircraft, was spotted by an Italian sharecropper.

"Inglese?" he asked.

"American," Col. Martone answered.

The man led Col. Martone to a hiding place and he was left alone, waiting in a town about 20 miles south of Pisa.

"Every little noise you hear, everything, is a possible threat," he said, still not fully trusting the man. "I probably could have been singing 'Yankee Doodle' and no one would have heard me, but everything is a threat."

Later in the day, the man returned with two other members of his family, holding fishing rods as a guise for a fishing trip if any inquisitive neighbors asked where they were going. They beckoned Col. Martone to come with them, bringing him to their home and hiding him inside a pile of hay bales.

"Dear friend, we have good news," one of the men said to him. "The allies are invading France."

It was D-Day.

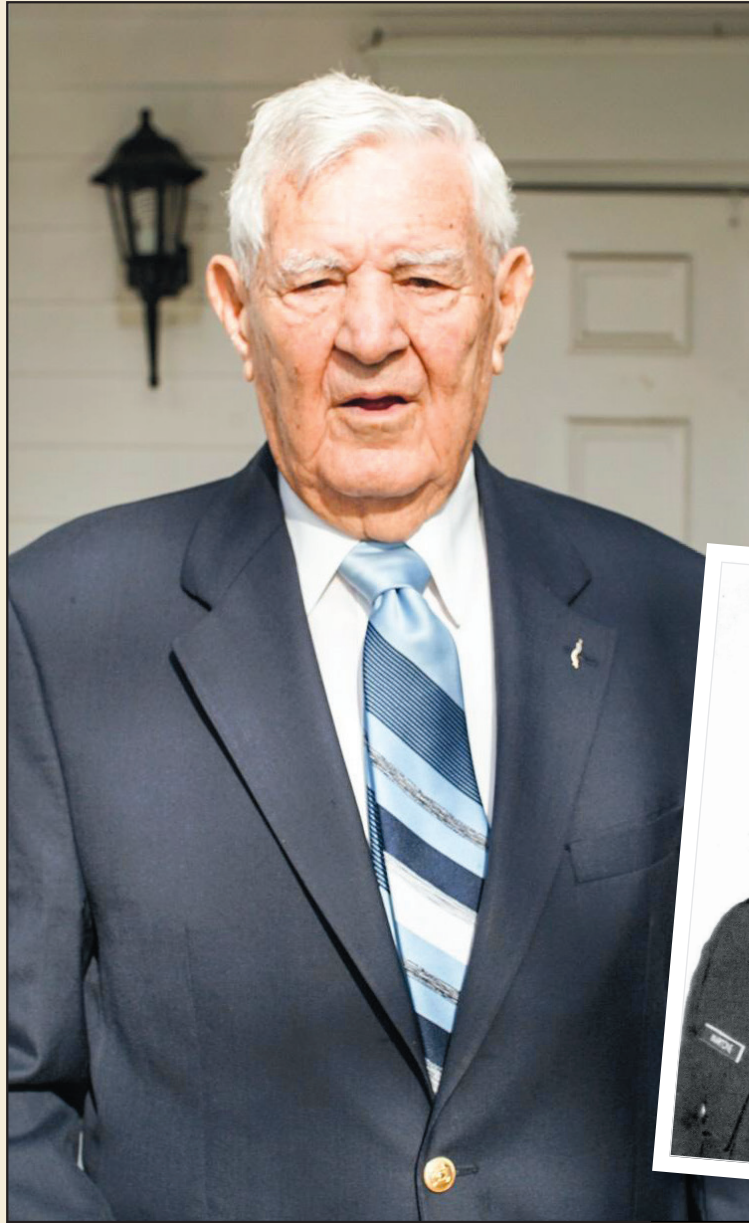
The family would later move him into their house, and for six days the family hid him until advancing American forces, pushing the Germans into a retreat in Italy, reached Col. Martone where he was returned.

As an evadee, Col. Martone was returned to the United States immediately, a common practice for evadees who may "run his mouth off" about potentially sensitive or compromising information about local civilians from their experiences.

This would be Col. Martone's last combat mission in World War II, but it was far from his first. In total, Col. Martone flew 166 missions for the United States Air Force, and was the recipient of two Purple Hearts. On Nov. 12, Col. Martone was officially inducted into the New Jersey Aviation Hall of Fame for his service in the war as well as his military service with the Air National Guard in the decades following.

Col. Martone, 95, has been a Spring Lake Heights resident since 1952 "when this street was still all gravel," he said. He began his military career at the outbreak of the war in 1941. Born and raised in Harrison to Italian immigrant parents. After the bombing of Pearl Harbor in December 1941, Col. Martone informed his mother that he would be joining the American effort. "She understood it. She understood that I had to go," he recalled.

Col. Martone said regardless of the war he likely was bound for military service.



TYLER SPRINGSTEEN THE COAST STAR

Above, Colonel Arthur Martone after speaking at the Woman's Club of Brielle in November. At right, Colonel Arthur Martone at the time of his military retirement in 1980.



PHOTO COURTESY OF THOMAS GRIFFIN

Col. Martone with Aviation Hall of Fame and Museum president Stephen Riethof and trustee Janis Keown-Blackburn.



*"Growing up, seeing the planes take off and landing everyday from the Newark Airport. It was something I'd always wanted to do growing up."*

COLONEL ARTHUR MARTONE

In 1940, he attended the Citizen's Military Training Corps at Fort Dix. Additionally, he had always been captivated by the prospect of flying airplanes.

"Growing up, seeing the planes take off and landing everyday from the Newark Airport. It was something I'd always wanted to do growing up," he said.

He applied to join the U.S. Air Force after graduating high school in 1941, and was sworn in as a second lieutenant in March 1942 when he began training at various air bases throughout the southern United States. He recalls the restlessness of waiting for deployment as he watched friends leave throughout his application process and tactical training.

Col. Martone was deployed from Florida in 1943, embarking on a series of stops en route to the front-line action in Europe. He went from Florida to Puerto Rico, Puerto Rico to British Guyana, from there to Brazil, and Brazil to different military outposts in Northern Africa while awaiting his first opportunity for combat.

He remembers the idle time spent in Cape Bon, Tunisia, simply waiting.

"We would sit around a campfire, sing songs with a guy playing an accordion. It was more like being in the Boy Scouts than being in the military," he said.

After some time, Col. Martone moved outside of Naples, Italy, to take part in the ongoing Allied invasion of Italy. His responsibilities as part of the 12th Air Force consisted of mainly ground attacks against enemy forces behind enemy lines for the Army, firing on enemy convoys and other ground

forces. It was here Col. Martone flew his first combat mission.

"The weather was very bad, so we flew over the German lines and jettisoned out bombs. And that was my exciting first mission," he said.

"I remember seeing one bomb explode through a break in the clouds and thought, 'I at least saw one shot fired.'"

"I was only 20 years old at the time," he said. "Flying through flak and all that, I was just getting used to it all."

Col. Martone vividly remembers his first combat kill. On a mission, he encountered a German Focke-Wulf Fw 190, a plane that Col. Martone said could outperform the Americans' P-40 jets, "In about everything except for a dive."

He shot a few bursts at the Fw and began overtaking the plane, which told him the Fw's engine was underperforming after flying through Allied flak. He saw smoke and flames emitting from the German plane and then knew "he was done for."

"I kept thinking to myself [the pilot should], 'Bail out! Bail out!' ... in another second or two he was crashing into the ground, big explosion and all that."

Col. Martone was credited with shooting the plane down. He said he'll never forget the incredulity he felt when congratulated by his flight leader on the kill.

"Did the pilot get out?" he had asked. "No," Col. Martone answered.

"Good. That's one son of a bitch we're not going to worry about tomorrow."

At first he had thought his leader coarse.

"Here I was, I just killed a guy who I could only imagine was someone like me, 20, 21 years old," he recalled. "I found out later that in three months I was just like him. It's what you're there to do, to hurt them," he said.

In May of 1944, Col. Martone was stationed at the Anzio beachhead, which he said the Germans referred to as "the largest POW [prisoner of war] camp in the world," since the Allied troops had been essentially confined there. While on a mission, Col. Martone's plane had some engine problems from overheating after running out of lubricating oil.

When anti-aircraft fire was directed at him, he assumed he must be emitting smoke, making him an easy target. Suddenly a piece of flak went right through his window, shattering the plexiglass and cutting up his arms, legs and face. He immediately put on his goggles, "which was like locking the barn door after the horse was stolen," he said. "I felt the blood dripping down my arm and thought, 'Well, hello Purple Heart.'"

He escaped the flak fire by flying through cloud cover, but was forced to belly-land back at Anzio. For an instant after landing he was almost unable to escape, thinking momentarily he would burn to death in the plane. He managed to get out.

"And I had that Purple Heart in my pocket 30 minutes after I hit the ground," the colonel said, smiling.

Following his crash landing, Col. Martone embarked on a more personal tour. His mother and father had grown up in a village not far from where he was in Italy, and he still had two aunts

living there. One day in late May, he made the trip and actually met with one of the aunts. He made plans with his aunt to return in exactly one week, where he would meet with his other aunt who lived a bit farther away.

Exactly one week later, on June 6, 1944, D-Day, Mr. Martone's plane was struck by debris from a fuel truck he destroyed. He was forced to eject behind enemy lines, where he was kept safe by a civilian family for six days. He had flown his final combat mission.

Col. Martone returned to the United States and became a P-40 instructor pilot, where he encountered more close calls, including a mid-air collision.

The whole time, however, he said he wanted to get back to combat, and tried to enlist to fly in the Pacific Theatre.

He joined the Air Force reserves at Newark Airport at the time, before joining the New Jersey Air National Guard in 1947. He was offered the position of Operations Officer for the 141st Fighter Squadron, which is stationed out of McGuire Air Force Base in Burlington County.

The squadron was called for active duty during the Korean War and was deployed to Turner Air Force Base in Georgia.

Col. Martone was selected to be the 141st commander after the unit was released from active duty in December 1952, and served as commander until 1959.

"That [position] gave me two things. One, I got what I wanted and got to fly. And two, my wife only wanted to live in one place instead of bouncing around the world," he said.

Col. Martone had more close calls forcing him to eject from his plane in post-war service. In 1958, he was forced to eject from a plane at night over the Pine Barrens. In 1971, following a lift-off, Col. Martone was forced to eject once more when his plane caught fire.

Despite his war experiences and beyond, Mr. Martone said he never thought about no longer flying.

"When something like that happens, you could go up and do it again in an hour," he said.

"It takes a lot of adrenaline out of you, but you feel confident. You know what you have to do."

Col. Martone flew his last military flight on June 30, 1980. He continued to fly planes with the Monmouth Area Flying Club, which he served as president for 10 years. He flew his last flight in August 2016 at the age of 93.

On Nov. 12, 2018, Col. Martone was inducted into the Aviation Hall of Fame and Museum of New Jersey in Teterboro, which Mr. Martone said was "A nice affair. I'm highly honored by it."

"Founded in 1972, the Aviation Hall of Fame and Museum of New Jersey is dedicated to the preservation of the Garden State's distinguished, two-century aviation and space heritage. The men and women, whose aeronautical achievements have brought worldwide recognition to the state are enshrined in the Hall of Fame," the museum's website states.

Patrick Reilly can be reached at preilly@thecoaststar.com or 732-223-0076 Ext 26.