

Obituaries

Robert Martin, Tuskegee Airman who flew ‘63 and a half’ combat missions, dies at 99

By Olesia Plokhii

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Robert L. Martin, a combat pilot who said he flew “63 and a half” missions during World War II as part of the barrier-breaking Tuskegee Airmen, was shot down over German-occupied territory on the 64th and spent five weeks trying to return to Allied lines with the help of Josip Broz Tito’s anti-fascist Yugoslav partisans, died July 26 at a senior living center in Olympia Fields, Ill. He was 99.

The cause was pneumonia, said his daughter, Gabrielle Martin.

Mr. Martin, known as “Fox,” grew up in Iowa and became entranced by airplanes when he attended an air show as a 13-year-old Boy Scout. He persuaded his father to let him take a ride on a Ford Trimotor.

“And the pilot, after starting the engine, buckled me in, he touched me with a wire and shocked me, and he said, ‘You’re going to be a pilot,’ ” he remembered in a [video interview](#) for the Experimental Aircraft Association, a Wisconsin-based international association promoting recreational flying. During college, Mr. Martin completed a civilian pilot-training program, joking that for a small fee “you could get silver wings and get all the girls.”

War was raging when he graduated from Iowa State University. He joined the Army Air Forces and trained at the segregated military complex in Tuskegee, Ala., in January 1944. With the rank of lieutenant, he immediately set sail for Italy and was attached to the 100th Fighter Squadron, which helped provide cover for Allied bombers on missions over targets in Europe.

On March 3, 1945, he was one of 24 Tuskegee Airmen who climbed into their single-seat P-51 Mustang fighters from their base in Ramitelli, Italy, to conduct a rail-strafting mission in parts of Slovenia and Austria. Two pilots did not return — Mr. Martin and Alphonso Simmons.

“We flew over this airfield where there was no opposition,” Mr. Martin said in 2008 at Chicago’s Pritzker Military Museum & Library, according to the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. “We saw two airplanes parked a little bit off the field, and we said, ‘We’ll get more credit for destroying two airplanes than shooting up a railroad train.’ We went in to shoot up these planes.”

Mr. Martin and Simmons were hit by antiaircraft fire. Simmons was killed.

“I said, ‘I’m not going to fry, I’m going to get out of here,’ ” he recalled in the Pritzker talk. “I got up high enough to bail out and my beautiful parachute opened and knocked me out — cut my chin open and floated me down to earth.”

He was spotted by members of Tito’s partisan forces, which controlled swaths of Yugoslav territory; Tito became Yugoslavia’s [postwar Communist strongman](#). Taken to a farmhouse, Mr. Martin was greeted by one of Tito’s men as a “warrior on the side of the Allies,” he told the Experimental Aircraft Association. “The guy fried me an egg and gave me a glass of grappa when he found I was hungry, and just told me to sit and wait.”

On March 10, he was taken to Topusko, Croatia, where he met with an Allied mission manned by British soldiers that helped downed Allied airmen. Because Topusko had natural hot springs, Mr. Martin said, it was the ideal place for recovery.

“They could take a bath in the natural hot spring bath house, get rid of all the lice and dirt and whatever, and they had clean uniforms, shoes, food to feed them, whisky, candy, books, a safe house, there was meat and flour and all types of foodstuffs dropped in by parachute to help these downed Allied airmen,” he said to the Experimental Aircraft Association.

After a month, he was airlifted to Bari, Italy, and weeks later he celebrated V-E Day in Naples. He soon embarked on a ship for home.

Robert Leander Martin was born in Dubuque, Iowa, on Feb. 9, 1919. His mother, a homemaker, died shortly after he was born. His father was a foot doctor.

He graduated from Iowa State University in 1942 with a bachelor’s degree in electrical engineering. After his military discharge in September 1945 at the rank of captain, he became an electrical engineer with the city of Chicago and retired in 1988.

His decorations included the Distinguished Flying Cross, the Purple Heart and seven awards of the Air Medal. He was among the recipients of the Congressional Gold Medal at a 2007 ceremony honoring the Tuskegee Airmen.

Survivors include his wife of 68 years, the former Odette Ewell, of Chicago; four children, Gabrielle Martin of Denver, Noelle Martin of Chicago, Dominique Martin of Olympia Fields and Robert Martin Jr. of Plymouth Meeting, Pa.; a sister; and two grandchildren.

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