

RAFE MARTIN ARCHIVAL DOCUMENT

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ABSTRACT

Biography

Rafe Martin is an author and internationally acclaimed storyteller. His father, Arthur P. Martin, was a navigator who flew search and rescue missions over “The Hump”—a nickname for the Himalayan mountains—as part of “Blackie’s Gang” during World War II. Rafe currently lives in Rochester, New York, and is a lay teacher of Zen Buddhism.

Summary

In this interview, Rafe recounts memories of his father and his role in Blackie’s Gang during the war. He connects hearing his father’s stories about the war and interacting with Asian cultures to his own experiences with storytelling and his decision to live by the principles of Buddhism.

Keywords

child, father, Blackie’s Gang, John Porter, Army Air Force, Himalayas, Nāgas, Everglades, Zen Buddhism, storytelling

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STORY TRANSCRIPTS

Story 1: Blackie’s Gang: A Fatal Mission [06:40 – 8:19]

So, Blackie’s Gang became very well-known as the first search and rescue crew in the China-Burma-India [(CBI)] Theater. And one of the interesting stories, and painful ones, was that when my dad was flying with them one time, he was asked if he would mind sitting out a particular flight. It was a milk run. There was someone up from southern India, a lieutenant I believe, who wanted to see how they worked [in order] to begin replicating the search and rescue operations in the CBI Theater. And also, this guy needed more flying time and his pay would be up if he had a few more hours.

So, they asked my dad—who went by Marty; that’s what he was known as—“Marty, would you mind sitting out this flight?” He said, “No, that’s fine.”

They took off, got a call from one of their other planes [that] they were under attack. They went to help. They thought it was P-40s, war hawks, coming toward them to join in. But it was actually more zeros. So, they were Japanese planes. They were outnumbered; they were shot up. One guy—I think Lieutenant Span, it may have been; I remember my dad saying that—got out through the top hatch. In fact, John Porter helped to push him out, even while he continued trying to keep the plane in flight. He got out and then very briefly after that, the plane smashed into the side of a mountain. They were all killed.

So, that one flight that my dad was asked *not* to participate in was when everyone got killed. [And] he survived.

Story 2: Flying Over “The Hump” **[12:14 – 14:00]**

Your quote says: “More than 1,000 airmen and 600 transport planes were lost flying air routes that were so dangerous they were called the “Aluminum Trail.”

Yeah, that’s why Captain John Porter created Blackie’s Gang: to bring people out because so many were dying—going down and getting lost in the jungles. Could not get out. I mean, you’re in the Himalayas. And there were also hostile indigenous peoples. Not that they were hostile to Americans. They were just hostile to people who suddenly were showing up in their territories.

Part of my dad’s job was to go in and trade with them to help bring out American flyers. So we—you know, [when] my brother and I were growing up, we had a spear with human scalps on it, poison darts. Things like that from the Nāgas, which were the people that he was trading with.

In any case, part of the difficulty—there were several—one was that: remember, the Himalayas really hadn’t been mapped at that time. So, nobody really knew how high some of those peaks were. And Mount Everest goes up to 30,000 feet. Now, the planes at that time when they were loaded couldn’t get up that high. And then, you had to go through valleys. But nobody knew if the valleys ended in dead ends. Plus, the winds at that height were so strong, I’ve read, that planes were often suspended in air. They had no forward motion. Even with all their engines going, they couldn’t go forward.

So, that combination of winds, height, unmapped mountain tops appearing out of mists: it wasn’t that they were shot down necessarily, it’s that the weather conditions were so extreme, the territory was so unmapped and unknown, that people just died trying to transport materials.

Story 3: Map Scarves
[14:15 – 15:15]

The scarf that I've got is a silk scarf that flyers would wear to keep their necks from chafing 'cause they had to—. One, remember the planes are unheated. You're talking about going up to 30,000 feet. It's 60 degrees below zero.

CSV: *So, they weren't just to be dashing and wear a scarf?*

No, that's an affect that happened later. But it was to keep their necks warm and from chafing 'cause you had to be searching for enemy aircraft all the time. But the scarves that they were given in the CBI Theater were actually maps. So, the scarves were printed—you know, black line, topography.

Terrain of Assam, upper and lower Burma, is the one I have. There may have been something that went further up towards Tibet as well. That one I don't have. So, when they were flying, if they were shot down—or if there was difficulty and they had to crash land—their scarf became their map to get out.

Story 4: Flying with My Father
[22:39 – 24:42]

My dad and I, every summer [flew together]. La Guardia airport is since taken over, but there used to be this little gravel and tar airport called Speeds. Which basically, the flyers who flew at Speeds and taught flying were veterans: World War II vets, pilots.

So, my dad and I would drive over there, since we lived in Queens and I was a little tiny kid. We'd get a pilot. 'Cause my dad, when he came back from overseas, had enough money to solo in seaplanes in Brooklyn Harbor. But he didn't have the money to continue flying. But he did get to solo.

I remember my mother told me how terrified she was. 'Cause, you know, he came to the point where he took off in this little seaplane, little Piper Cub seaplane. He took off and she's just terrified. And I was a little kid; very little kid. And she's holding my hand and she says to the guy, the pilot, "You know, how far along is it?"

And he said, "Oh, don't worry, there's not much gas left." [*laughs*] So instead of not worrying, she *really* began to worry! Yeah, but he flew around the harbor several times, and came in and landed.

So anyway, he didn't have a pilot's license, but he could fly. And he'd always wanted to. In fact, he'd enlisted in the Air Force to be a pilot, but they said his eyesight wasn't 20/20. So then, he became a navigator instead.

In any case, we'd get a pilot and a little two-door, Piper Cub. Basically, [it was] paper covered, with a tailskid in the back, a wheel in the back. It's really the old deal kind of Piper Cubs. And back then, you could take off and circle the Empire State Building, circle the Statue of Liberty. I mean there were no limits.

So yeah, so we had great times just going up in little airplanes and he loved doing that. And my brother and I both kinda got connected feeling that we really liked airplanes, too.

Story 5: Buddhism and World War II **[33:46 – 35:31]**

You find that war is terrible; almost [an] aberration of what our potential is as human beings. And yet, every one of us has lived with the consequences of war. Every one of us. It doesn't matter if your family was directly in World War II or not.

And as I mentioned before we started, my wife was born in a displaced persons camp at the end of the war in Italy. Her parents had met in an Italian prison in Yugoslavia. Half the prison was murdered because they were required to by lottery. They were sent back to Germany. The Italian commandant *refused* to let the others go. He brought them to Albania, to Muslim peasants, who took in these Jews and shared everything that they had with them. And that's how they survived.

So, every one of us who is alive now has been impacted by the horrible things that human beings *can* do to one another. And the Buddhist perspective is when we don't know our real nature, which is a nature of wisdom and compassion—. When we're cut off from that, we do horrible things not just to ourselves, but to the environment: to animals, plants, trees. We pollute the waters that we need to drink. We destroy the air we need to breathe. And we harm ourselves in doing these things.

So, partly, I think the response to the war for my wife and myself is to practice a path of greater peacefulness, as a response to what the Holocaust and a response to what World War II was. That was our response: to try and get to the root of it and find a way to live in a different way. It doesn't change the world, but you can start by trying to change yourself.

PHOTO CAPTIONS

Current 1

Portrait of narrator Rafe Martin (Courtesy of Rafe Martin)

Artifact 1

Photograph of Blackie's Gang, a search and rescue unit that operated in the China-Burma-India Theater during World War II (Courtesy of Rafe Martin)

Artifact 2

Arthur Martin trading with the Naga tribe of East Asia (Courtesy of Rafe Martin)

Artifact 3

Arthur Martin serving as a navigator for Blackie's Gang in World War II (Courtesy of Rafe Martin)

Artifact 4

Scarf worn by Rafe's father, Arthur Martin, that doubled as a map of the surrounding CBI Theater terrain, in case of an airplane crash (Courtesy of Rafe Martin)

Artifact 5

Rafe Martin holds a spear from the Nāga tribe of the Himalayas, whom his father traded with during his time in Blackie's Gang (Photo Credit: Celeste Schantz Kovachi)