

The Sunday Times
Perspective

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 20, 2022

Killed in action in WWII, a Scranton soldier comes home

Lost in an ambush nearly 80 years ago, Pfc. Francis P. Martin was found by searchers tracing the deepest of family ties.

The DNA of the daughter born after Martin left Scranton to fight in World War II was the key to bringing him home more than seven decades after he died in the French countryside.

Martin's daughter, Mary,



CHRIS KELLY
Kelly's World

passed away in 2015, too soon to know that the remains of the father she never knew were identified by the blood they shared.

"I wish she was here to get these answers," said Martin's granddaughter, Erin Alverson, in a phone interview from her home in New Jersey. Since the federal Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) announced last week that it had identified Martin's remains, Erin has fielded many media calls.

Erin's mother, Mary

David, never stopped wondering about her father, who left for war a few months before her birth. The details of his service were available in military records, but his absence from her life and unrecovered remains kept her emotional wounds from fully healing.

Pfc. Martin was a 25-year-old machine-gunner when he was killed in January

1945 in northeastern France. He was assigned to Company D, 1st Battalion, 157th Infantry Regiment of the 45th Infantry Division. The 45th — known as the "Thunderbirds" — was among the first Army National Guard units deployed for battle in World War II.

Martin was killed on a truck convoy bringing ammunition to the front

lines. His body was never recovered and he was listed as missing in action. German records captured after the war offered no evidence Martin was held as a prisoner of war: The War Department declared Martin dead on Jan. 17, 1946.

Six days later, a story in The Scranton Times

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SUNDAY TIMES FILE

John Basalyga, owner of the Marketplace at Steamtown, was surprised when he won the bid for the downtown complex.

JOHN BASALYGA SUNDAY CONVERSATION

Among numerous successful developers currently developing projects in Scranton and Lackawanna County, John Basalyga stands out as being an area native and repurposing many local buildings. Prominent projects include the Marketplace at Steamtown in downtown Scranton, the Giant Floor building in South Scranton, the Parodi cigar building in North Scranton. He's also proposed a 17-story building on Franklin Avenue and Mulberry Street that if completed, will change the skyline of the city. Basalyga was a recent guest on Times-Shamrock's News Engine podcast, hosted by Ed Pikulski.

Here is the interview, edited for length.

News Engine: John Basalyga has become a familiar name and face in Northeastern Pennsylvania. What started as a roofing company has grown into a real estate development company. John has expanded to become the owner of Crunch Fitness in Scranton, The Old Brook Inn in Springbrook, the Farr Street Tavern in Scranton, and of course, The Marketplace at Steamtown, in addition to a whole bunch of other projects. John, welcome to the News Engine podcast.

John Basalyga: Thank you, Ed. Thanks for having me.

NE: I've been trying to get you in here for a while. You're a busy



Listen to the podcast

In this latest installment of our Sunday Conversation, Interactive Media Director Ed Pikulski speaks with developer John Basalyga. This is an abridged version of the podcast that can be found at the [times-tribune.com/blogs](https://www.times-tribune.com/blogs).

guy, to say the least. And I can tell that just on our walk in. We didn't get much further than the lobby of the building before people were stopping you. Everybody wanted to congratulate you on some of your accomplishments. They wanted updates on your projects. They wanted to hear what you were working on next. We've had a bunch of people in here, the mayor of Scranton, the mayor of Wilkes-Barre, but I have to be honest, when you walked in, there was a buzz in the building. And I get the sense that that happens to you, wherever you go. I have a feeling a lot of people want to talk to you and, and tell you what they think or thank you or see what you're up to next.

JB: It's a huge compliment, Ed. And thank you. And that's probably my favorite part of what I do is talking to people. Every project I do and everything I try to do in my life is based on community outreach and support and how we could (do) better and work as a team. So when you see people coming up to you, and are excited and asking you questions, that just means I'm right on track with

what I plan to do. So it's, it's wonderful.

NE: You've got quite a business and development footprint here in the region. You started as a really young guy, you owned your own roofing company, but you have really expanded what you do since then. So how do you segue from the guy who owns a roofing company to (being) a major developer in northeastern Pennsylvania?

JB: One of the greatest things I learned from roofing — it's hard work, and teamwork, because you're working with multiple people to get a project done. I started roofing at the age of 13 and before that, I was doing grass cutting for people. ... I worked for a neighbor at 13, right up through high school. I really enjoyed it. I became a foreman after a few years, leading people — even guys a lot older than me — getting them to work to their best ability, and getting the highest yield out of people, keeping everybody happy, which isn't always the easiest thing to do. I started my own company at 20 ... and I was doing roofs on buildings that were getting built into apartments or remodeled,

new construction ... and I always loved that at the end of the day ... we walked through the building as we're leaving, and just seeing the progress from all the other trades. I remember a specific instance, when I was doing a roof and I'm filthy dirty, it's dark out ... and I'm leaving and I see the guy that owned the building, bringing people in, it was a residential conversion and everybody's clean and nice and going through the building the buildings all just been painted, new flooring, and I'm like this is neat. That kind of got me going on it. I bought my roofing shop after a few years (then), I needed a bigger building and moved out and I turned that into apartments ... that's how I got my start. Just like that. Organic growth.

NE: You were probably thrilled to a certain degree to get out of the elements, maybe off of the roof and work. You're still getting your hands dirty, but you're now in a slightly less hostile environment.

JB: Until last year I did 100% of the estimating for my roofing company. It turned into a big company ... based right out of here in Jessup. Every single day, I see three-quarters, two-thirds of my days still tied up in that company. It's my biggest company still. I am a roofer. I was not a guy who just inherited a roofing company or something like that. I started off with absolutely nothing, built it from scratch, did everything in that way my whole entire life. My only teammates are my employees. I've been surrounded by great people. I've been very blessed.

NE: With everything you've got going on, you're still going out there — until very recently — and you were still doing 100% of the estimates for the project. I don't know where you find the time to do all this.

JB: It's a lot of hours. If you don't enjoy what you're doing, it's tough. But if you really love what you're doing, you see a difference, it's easy. And one of the things I love the most was seeing progress. ... I tell the guys if I can't see with my own eyes that something changed from yesterday, you're not doing your job. So every day, you get that feeling of accomplishment. You're not stuck in the same building every day for 20, 30 years. You're going from project to project to project.

NE: (Are) You a tough guy to work for?

JB: I think I'm very fair. Through the interview process ... I ask people ... you're probably not gonna work 40 hours a week, probably much more than that and sometimes after hours, you'll have to answer a phone, or text or WhatsApp. And if you're willing to do that, then you'll fit in here. But if not, you're just going to be disappointed, I'm going to be disappointed. And I found that after the years of getting good talent, it brings in good talent. Because good people want to work amongst good people. ... I have a lot of guys that work for me that had their own companies for years and were successful (but) just had enough of it, the taxes and the accounts receivable, the payables. So a lot of guys I have understand the business, understand having employees. It's helped a lot, tremendously.

NE: What are some of the other ongoing challenges you have to deal with regularly?

JB: When you're presented with an issue — I don't even call it a problem — there's always a solution. And when you think long and hard enough about something, you can figure it out. So I take everything as it comes ... People ask how do you do

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