

## A Resident's Story by John Lanza

John J. Cooney grew up during the tough times of the Great Depression in North Bergen, New Jersey, as the oldest of five children. In 1939, at the age of sixteen, things got even tougher when he lost his father and he and his fourteen-year old brother Robert became the main breadwinners of the family.

Cooney remained in school, but he worked several jobs. He worked for a tailor during the week, an A&P on Saturdays, and a deli on Sundays.

Often, he brought home unsold food for the family. At the age of twenty he answered the call and entered the Army Air Forces. He trained hard to become a ball-turret gunner on a B-24 Liberator, a four-engine heavy bomber with a ten-man crew. They were being trained to defend against enemy cannons on the ground and enemy fighters in the air while flying

missions to bomb precise targets from four miles up. After training for seventeen months, Cooney and the crew headed for Europe. They were assigned to the 725th Bomb Squadron of the 451st Bomb Group in Castelluccio dei Sauri, Italy.

Cooney entered into combat in October 1944 and flew thirty-five missions over the last seven months of the war. He had many harrowing experiences, but one in particular stood out in his mind, his fourth mission on October 23, 1944. On that fateful day seventy years ago, his plane was flying over the

Adriatic Sea to bomb a target in Germany. About 150 miles from the home base, it lost number one engine when a cylinder head blew and number two engine because of an excessive oil leak.

They were forced to abort the mission and drop out of the formation. His pilot Bob Cookman and his co-pilot Russ Flint acted quickly to prevent the aircraft from going into a spin, and struggled to fly it back to the Italian mainland on two engines.



Cooney recalls that the aircraft was descending rapidly and gradually getting out of control despite the heroic efforts of Cookman and Flint. With no suitable place in sight for a crash landing, Cookman ordered his crew to abandon ship. Flint jumped at about 1,000 feet, but Cookman bailed too low for his chute to open properly and save his life. Thanks to the heroics of

his pilot and to his trusty parachute, Cooney survived the war. He attended Haverford College on the GI Bill, married and raised five children. When he was in Italy, he had an Italian tailor make his parachute into a silk wedding dress. Having worked for a tailor, he knew the value of silk, especially the silk that saved his life. The significance of the dress has never been lost on his daughter Mary. She has worn it on Veterans Day to educate her class about veterans like her father whose service and sacrifice preserved our precious freedoms.