

## 2024 FORMER TROOPERS OF THE YEAR

It is with great pride and pleasure that the Association of Former New Jersey State Troopers, Inc., announce Sergeants First Class Anthony S. Marinello, #3420 (*Ret*), and Benny Matos, #4313 (*Ret*) as co-recipients of the Association's 2024 Former Troopers of the Year!



Deacon Benny Matos (*Left*) and Anthony Marinello walk in front of the Sikorsky S-76 helicopter they flew to rescue Americans in Haiti this past March and April 2024.

Anthony (Tony) and Benny have always answered the call to serve; to our Outfit of Jersey Troopers, their faith and their church, and to many who were in dire need of their expertise as Medivac Helicopter Pilots. They each had remarkable State Police careers, Tony's beginning on June 29, 1979, and Benny's on June 19, 1986, as proud members of the 95<sup>th</sup> and 104<sup>th</sup> Classes respectively. Each man began their State Police careers posted as Road Troopers in Troop B, patrolling the rural region of northern New Jersey and the heavily travelled corridor highways that crisscrossed the mountainous landscape. They worked closely with senior Troopers to gain a better understanding of the importance of servicing the citizenry and visiting travelers many needs and concerns that Jersey Troopers handle daily, not to mention their postings at Troop D, the

New Jersey Turnpike and turning a routine road stop into a patrol-related-arrest and subsequent criminal investigations.

Both Tony and Benny sought private training and licensure as "Fixed-wing" and "Rotor-wing" Pilots. Ultimately, each man submitted application for consideration as Helicopter Pilots in the NJSP Helicopter Bureau, where Tony began flying for the NJSP in March 1986, and Benny in January 2001. Shortly after being posted to the Helicopter Bureau, both men began flying Medivac Helicopter duty. For his first couple years, Tony flew solo with a flight nurse, transporting those in need directly to medical care facilities. Then GEMSTAR began operations, and Tony flew the first NJSP/NORTHSTAR Sikorsky Medivac Helicopter transport on July 1, 1988, the first day of operations! A dozen years later, Benny was posted to the Helicopter Bureau in January 2001, and began flying NJSP/NORTHSTAR Sikorsky Medivac Helicopter transports, and the two men quickly became the best of friends, a relationship that remains resolute to this day.

Throughout each of their State Police careers Tony and Benny were recognized as intelligent and dogged Troopers who received many accolades for their accomplishments, including Tony's receipt of New Jersey State Police - Letters of Commendation in 1984 for delivering a baby at Interchange 18W on the New Jersey Turnpike, and in 1988 for providing security at the trial of Thomas Manning, for the murder of Trooper II Philip Lamonaco; and Benny's receipt of a New Jersey State Police - Certificate of Commendation for rescuing an infant from a burning house, to name only a few!

While Tony's and Benny's State Police careers were certainly ones to be emulated, their nomination for this prestigious award was not based solely on their loyal and dedicated twenty-five plus years of service as enlisted members and non-commissioned officers of the New Jersey State Police, but their continued years of tireless service to their communities, their faith in their church and in their fellow man, as teachers and mentors who not only gave instruction and guidance, but lived the guidance and belief they both shared.

Upon their retirement from the State Police Service, Tony in September 2006, and Benny in January 2012, continued sharing their expertise in helicopter transport, as fliers, trainers, and in this case, most importantly, as Medivac Helicopter Pilots. Tony continued flying in the greater New Jersey / New York City area as the first Chief Pilot for the Newark City Police Department in 2006, where thanks to his eyes in the sky, the city's violent crime rate dropped 20%, as did other criminal activities at even higher rates! Tony also flew elite transportation for U.S. Helicopter, he freelanced, and trained Sikorsky pilots, before venturing south to fly out of the Fort Lauderdale, Florida area where he began flying for Tropic Air Charters, a fixed-wing charter service to the Bahamas and other Caribbean Islands. A year later, Tony purchased Tropic Air Charters. In 2022, Tony received an inquiry for information on any Medivac Helicopter services between Florida and the Bahama Islands, but there were none. That inquiry was the catalyst that sparked Tony's focus to establish Tropic Air Rescue. For the next two-years, Tony obtained two Sikorsky S-76 Helicopters and became the first licensed Air Rescue Service in the State of Florida and by the Bahamian Government. Tropic Air Rescue went active on March 1, 2024!

Benny's retirement from the New Jersey State Police on January 1, 2012, took him and his family directly to West Palm Beach, Florida where he had secured a position at FlightSafety International as a Sikorsky S-76 Helicopter Instructor. FlightSafety International is an elite training facility that both Tony and Benny were well versed and trained at throughout their NJSP and after flight safety training and accreditation. Benny excelled at FlightSafety International, becoming Program Manager for the Sikorsky S-76D Helicopter Program. For 7 ½ years, Benny trained pilots from all over the world until he received a higher calling and entered the rigorous religious program of participation to become an Ordained Deacon in the Catholic Church, where he has served for the past year in that capacity at Our Lady, Queen of the Apostles Parish in Royal Palm Beach, Florida. Benny is also a Field Agent for the Knights of Columbus and assisted Tony with flight duties on a as need basis. So, when Tony reached out to Benny to undertake a lifesaving mission, Benny didn't hesitate to get involved.

### **THE MISSION:**

It was Sunday evening, March 10, 2024, when Tony's phone rang. The caller explained that they were calling on behalf of Congressman Cory Mills (FL-07) to see if there was a way to coordinate a rescue mission of ten Americans from Port-Au-Prince, Haiti. At first, Tony thought there was no way this call could be legit; how could it be? Tropic Air Rescue was only ten days old! Tony challenged the caller, who assured him the request was real. Gangs of violent rebels had forced the airport in Port-au-Prince, Haiti's largest city, to close, and hundreds of Americans were effectively trapped. Among them were Mitch Albom, a bestselling author based in Michigan, and nine other visitors to the orphanage Albom established in Port-au-Prince. A member of the group contacted U.S. Rep. Lisa McClain of Michigan for assistance, who called Congressman Mills. The congressman needed a pilot crew to evacuate the Americans in Haiti, and Tony was the 13<sup>th</sup> pilot his office had contacted – the first 12 were unable, or unwilling to help. Thinking about it for a minute Tony replied, "Yeah, I think we can do that." But first,

Tony had to call Benny. They had been through a lot together over the past two decades and trusted each other explicitly; bottom line, No Benny, No Mission. At first Benny wasn't sure about going, that was until he heard who needed to be rescued. "When Tony said these Americans were serving an orphanage, I was in - in an instant," Benny recalled.

The next 30 hours were spent meticulously planning the mission from start to finish, as they island hopped from Fort Lauderdale to the Dominican Republic, before flying into Haiti to execute the rescue extraction. Joining Tony and Benny on the mission were Congressman Mills, a U.S. Army veteran, who had rescued Americans from dangerous situations in Afghanistan in 2021, and Brian Young, a U.S. Army Special Forces veteran. This mission, however, was a bit different. This mission was a civilian operation, and all four men were flying into hostile territory, unarmed!

Before leaving Santo Domingo Airport, Congressman Mills asked Benny to offer a prayer and blessing for the group. The four men joined hands and bowed their heads. When they looked up, they saw the entire terminal – practically every person in the building had stopped to watch them pray. They didn't know exactly what these four men were going to do, but they knew something was happening.

Around 2 a.m., the crew began the 30-minute flight from Santo Domingo to a new, hopefully safer, extraction location. Given the sudden change, Tony had only a satellite image of the location – he would be landing almost sight unseen. To help him find the spot, he instructed the evacuees to listen for the helicopter and then 'Blink every light in the house like a Christmas tree.'

Tony flew the helicopter over the Dominican-Haitian border and between two mountain ridges with Benny as his navigator, before breaking through the clouds. "That's when the seriousness of what they were doing really set in," Benny recalled.

They soon spotted the blinking house lights. Helicopter pilots are trained to always fly a few reconnaissance circles when approaching an unfamiliar landing zone, especially at night, to detect wires or trees that could endanger the landing. But Tony decided they didn't have enough time for that – Port-au-Prince was essentially a war zone. They were going in, blind.

Just as the helicopter touched down, Cory and Brian jumped out and began yelling a series of commands: "All 10 here?" "Everybody in?" "Everybody OK?" "Everybody got passports?" "GO!!!" The rescue, from touchdown to liftoff, took just 67 seconds.

With 14 people now aboard, they flew back to the airport in Barahona, Dominican Republic. From there, the evacuees would take a three-hour shuttle to Santo Domingo and fly back to the United States. But before that could happen, they were stopped by Dominican airport security.

"We had told them we were on a diplomatic mission," Tony said. "But when we got back and a dozen people poured out of the helicopter, their eyes got as big as saucers, and they started pulling out their radios."

Several enforcement agencies arrived to question the group. But thanks to Benny's translation efforts, any confusion was cleared up.

The exhausted crew returned home the next morning, but their respite was short-lived. Within a few days, Florida's Governor, Ron DeSantis' office reached out to Tony about leading a second rescue mission, this time coordinated with Haitian officials. The state estimated an additional 400-600 Floridians were still trapped in Haiti. Tony and Benny jumped back into their flight suits and headed to Cap-Haitien International Airport on Haiti's northern shore – about 80 miles north of Port-au-Prince – on March 18<sup>th</sup>.

There, Tony and Benny experienced a taste of the violent chaos that had enveloped the city. An armed group of Haitians tried to prevent them from taking the people to be evacuated. Security guards connected to the evacuees pushed back. Helping people into the helicopter, Benny – unarmed because this was still just a civilian operation – was stuck in the middle. “I had to push one guy and punch another just to get back into the helicopter,” Benny recalled. “I basically jumped into the helicopter and told Tony to GO! I didn't even have a seat belt on when we took off.”

Tony and Benny returned to Cap-Haitian on April 8<sup>th</sup>; this time joined by a contingent of air rescue helicopters from many other countries. Over the next week, Tony and Benny flew three to five missions to Port-au-Prince each day, picking up groups of 8 to 10 people, most of whom were humanitarian aid workers. This time, things went smoothly. Tony and Benny flew until April 14<sup>th</sup> and were personally responsible for rescuing 143 people during their three rescue trips to Haiti. By April 19<sup>th</sup> more than 700 people had been evacuated from the Haitian capital.

Throughout their State Police careers and into retirement Tony and Benny have earned reputations emulated and respected by active and retired Jersey Troopers and pilots throughout the aviation community. Their honesty and integrity are beyond reproach, and their competence and character are the epitome of the core values of the New Jersey State Police, "Honor – Duty – Fidelity." It is undeniable that SFC Anthony S. Marinello, #3420 (*Ret*) and SFC Benny R. Matos, #4313 (*Ret*) are exactly the type of recipient our Former Troopers Association is proud to bestow this coveted honor upon. They consistently represent our Association of Former Jersey Troopers and our beloved New Jersey State Police with honor, dignity, and professionalism.

Tony and Benny have earned this award through their brave and selfless expert service to aid their fellow men and women. They are truly compassionate and professional executive leaders, and true friends to all! Please join me in congratulating SFC Anthony S. Marinello, #3420 (*Ret*) and SFC Benny R. Matos, #4313 (*Ret*) as the 2024 Former Troopers of the Year.

Presentation of the awards will take place on November 21, 2024, at the Grand Marquis, 1550 Route 9, Old Bridge, New Jersey 08857, 6:00 – 10:00 p.m. Addition information and pre-registration will be posted in the near future.

My Sincerest Regards,  
Lt. George J. Wren, Jr., #3680 (*Ret*)  
President  
Association of Former New Jersey State Troopers, Inc.

*Supporting information by:*  
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