

He survived the Battle of the Bulge and stormed the beaches of Normandy.
Now, at 104, he's still golfing three days a week.

By Kevin Paul Dupont, Boston Globe Staff, December 12, 2024



Arthur Medeiros is now a little more than 80 years removed from landing in Normandy on D-Day.

PORTSMOUTH, R.I. — There are only good and better days out here for Arthur Medeiros. He has golfed at Montaup Country Club for more than 40 years, gets around its 18 holes with a familiarity on par with how Einstein navigated $E=mc^2$, and faithfully plays three rounds every week when the weather's right.

"Light rain, he'll play. Temps in the 40s, no snow on the ground, Arthur's on the course," mused Eddie Cabral, fellow Montaup member and a regular Medeiros playing partner. "He just plays. And don't let his age fool you. He's super, super competitive. All Arthur cares about is playing and playing well."

All of which caught Cabral a bit by surprise one recent autumn day when his old pal surrendered after four holes and retreated to the warmth of Montaup's clubhouse. Factoring in the stiff wind off Narragansett Bay, noted Cabral, the real-feel temperature had dipped to nearly the freezing mark.

Mother Nature doesn't set the tee times, but she can be one cruel course marshal for a man 104 years old.

"A bunch of the guys said, 'Nah, I'm not playing . . . too cold . . . too windy,'" said Cabral, who keeps close watch on his friend when they're on the course. "Arthur that day was one of only six who even went out. All these guys said no and Arthur's calling

'em all 'a bunch of weenies.' But in he goes after four holes. We finish, and I see him inside and he says, 'Eddie, I'm just starting to get the feeling back in my fingers.' "

Not hard to understand why Medeiros has had his fill of cold and snow. Along with myriad war injuries, including one that for weeks left him paralyzed from the waist down in a World War II field hospital, winter's chill largely frames the wartime horrors he witnessed — and survived — particularly his long, bone-chilling days at the Battle of the Bulge.

"Ask anyone who was there then, they'll tell you. Yeah, the fighting was bad, but it was the cold," said Medeiros, thinking back to the winter of 1944-45, particularly his six weeks in the hellscape of Ardennes. "They said it was the coldest winter in Europe in 100 years; just snow all the time and cold, cold, cold. My God. There's no forgetting that."

Born May 10, 1920, in Fall River, Medeiros is truly in a league of his own on the golf course as a steady-handed, deft-of-club centenarian. He gets around by cart, because the 18 holes would be "too tough" on his legs and back, where doctors surgically removed shrapnel some 15 years after the war. His eyesight has diminished in recent years as a result of macular degeneration. The bit of white paint dabbed on the top of his driver helps him identify the ball atop the tee.

"They won't let me drive the cart anymore," said Medeiros, chuckling, "not after I hit the guy."

Bill Gasbarro, explained Medeiros, turned his way after making a shot that day from the fairway, and essentially walked into his partner's driving path. Down went Gasbarro. With other golfers scrambling to pick up the victim, a flustered Medeiros, his foot caught between brake and accelerator, ran him over a second time.

"Oh my god, the poor guy!" recalled Medeiros, unable to stifle a laugh. "His hearing aids popped out, and everyone's on hands and knees trying to find the hearing aids. The guys are laughing like hell. I felt terrible. He called me later that night, to tell me he'd had X-rays, his knee and shoulder, on his way home."

Not to worry, no fractures, all would be OK, Medeiros recalls Gasbarro telling him.

"And he's apologizing to me . . . imagine?!" said Medeiros, the pitch of his voice rising as his laugh grows bigger. " 'Don't be sorry, I'm saying, 'I ran you over!' "

The laughs help. Part of the trick to living this long, said Medeiros, has been always "to look for the funny stuff."

Look for humor, even in the war, when the laughs were few, and the price was high even for survivors.

"My wife was wonderful . . . I had a lot of black . . . flashbacks," recalled Medeiros. "For a year, it was tough. I'd wake up in the middle of the night, terrible, I don't know how she stood it."

Arthur, with Irene at his side, sought the help of "two different doctors."

"And they both said the same thing. 'You'll have to live through it. Work it out,' " said a wistful Medeiros. "Now, I guess they have things they can do for you. But it was tough. But I wasn't the only one."



Arthur Medeiros, 104, plays golf regularly at Montaup Country Club in Rhode Island.

'Angel on my shoulder'

Medeiros is now a little more than 80 years removed from landing in Normandy on D-Day, unleashing a 50-caliber machine gun toward enemy fire as he raced on to Omaha Beach, and months later holding off Germany's late-stage, ferocious push along the Western Front during the Battle of the Bulge (Dec. 16, 1944-Jan. 25, 1945).

"I made it back," Medeiros said during a quiet moment away from the golf course. "I must have had an angel on my shoulder."

All told, for the time served in the Duration, beginning when he shipped off to Europe in 1942, Medeiros was decorated with three Purple Hearts as well as Bronze and Silver stars. One of the Purple Hearts is included among a cluster of medals proudly pinned inside a display case that hangs in his one-bedroom apartment in Bristol, just 5 miles up the road from Montaup.

"Love playing golf," said Medeiros, who routinely shoots in the high 80s or low 90s, a dozen strokes or more below his age. "Mostly, it's about always trying to get a better score, like every golfer says. And really, at this age, it's all I've got left."

Many veterans of Medeiros's generation, upon returning home from World War II, spoke little of their days on the battlefield. Most were stoic, forever tightlipped, unable or unwilling to speak about what they witnessed. They were home. It was over over there and was best left there.

Medeiros, who in June was among the United States veterans who returned to Normandy for the 80-year remembrance of D-Day, talks freely about his war experience, as if it's a sense of duty.

"Feel I should talk, take the time," he said to a recent visitor to his apartment at Benjamin Church Manor, a senior living home, as he fussed with the key to the front door. "There's so few of us left."

Members of the Greatest Generation, as they came to be known, typically immersed themselves back into civilian society, restarted careers, began families, bought homes and cars, and drove the expansion to the suburbs.

Medeiros did all that. He and Mary (known as Irene by family and friends) married in 1941, raised two daughters (Eleanor and Sharon), and bought a home in Pawtucket. For decades, Arthur made his living as a truck driver, a job he tailored over the years mostly to routes in New England. He knew the spots with courses where he could pull over, pop out with his 6-iron, and play a couple of holes.

"My wife was wonderful, a sweetheart," said Medeiros. "She'd open the blinds in the morning, look outside, and say, 'Looks great out there, Arthur, why don't you go play golf?' It took me a while, but I finally figured it out. I'd come home and she'd say, 'OK, Arthur, why don't you wash up, and when you're ready, we'll go out to dinner.' Oh, we went out for dinner a lot."

In his late teens, before he was married, Medeiros began working in Pawtucket as a machinist at the Haskell Manufacturing Plant, maker of screws and fasteners. When "the fighting got hot" in Europe, Medeiros said, he was drafted in 1941. Initially, his draft status was deferred, because Haskell's goods were deemed vital to the war effort.

But when the factory owner's son was in need of work, Medeiros was out of a job "in a couple of weeks" and soon headed to boot camp.

Upon his return from Europe, Medeiros promptly returned to the Haskell plant, eager to resume life and career. Daughter Eleanor had been born while he was overseas.

"She was so cute, just this little thing," said Medeiros, laughing as he recalled the joy of first seeing his infant daughter. "While I was away, my wife had this framed picture of me, and she'd show it to Eleanor and say, 'That's Daddy.' And I'll never forget, first time seeing her, her mom's holding up the picture and she's saying, 'That's Daddy!'"

Medeiros was equally flummoxed by his initial greeting back at Haskell's, where he was told, sorry, no job. Offering no explanation, recalled Medeiros, the manager sent him on his way. He was a 25-year-old vet, a decorated war hero, with a wife and child, and no job.

"So these two Irish brothers, the Fitzgeralds, owned the place, really nice guys, sweethearts," said Medeiros. "And they see me as I'm walking out. They come over, and give me this big welcome back, you know, 'Arthur, great to see you!' and all that. I tell 'em, 'Great, thanks, but I'm told there's no job.'"

According to Medeiros, the Fitzgeralds promptly sacked the manager, upon learning he was demanding veterans fork over \$50 if they wanted to reclaim their positions. Medeiros was back on the job.

All through the years, beginning at age 11, Medeiros golfed. The only interruption was the war. For the better part of 90 years, he has been out on the fairways and

greens. Years ago, "when I could hit the ball a long way," he said, he routinely was shooting around par.

"Somewhere around there," he said. "Maybe a 3-4-5 handicap, but we didn't pay much attention to handicaps back then."



Arthur Medeiros routinely shoots in the high 80s or low 90s, a dozen strokes or more below his age.

Music to his ears

Music was another of Medeiros's loves. For his 16th birthday, his mother bought him a trombone. It was 1936, America deep in the throes of the Great Depression, but Georgianna Medeiros, born in the Azores, scraped together the 50 cents a week until the \$75 trombone was paid in full. When her eldest son went off to war, the trombone eventually made its way over there.

"Too hard for me to play it now," said Medeiros, who recently gifted the trombone to a good pal, one who promises to keep playing it. "He'll love it. Better he gets it instead of someone who'll turn it into a planter or something. I'd hate that."

For decades, along with golfing and driving a truck, Medeiros organized and directed musical bands. The Arthur Medeiros Swing Band had 16 members. The Pawtucket Concert Band was nearly triple in size.

He loved Louis Armstrong on the trumpet, and Ella Fitzgerald's voice.

'Oh, beautiful. Her voice, the words," he said.

Armstrong and Fitzgerald were big names when Medeiros headed off to war, dog tags around his neck, his wife's tiny childhood prayer book tucked in his back pocket.

"Oh, I read it a lot, over and over and over," said Medeiros, flipping open the book to show a visitor his wife's name written on the inside cover. Mary "Irene" Medeiros (nee Botelho) died in 2007. "We'd be on a machine gun nest, two or three of us, taking turns. I'd get my break and read it."

On D-Day, June 6, 1944, Medeiros was among the thousands of Allied soldiers to storm Normandy's beaches, Day 1 in the fight to liberate France. The prayer book was in his back pocket. He also had rosary beads, handed to him by a Jewish rabbi, he recalled, during a faith ceremony held on board ship in the English Channel before the troops divvied up into smaller landing boats.

"I grew up Catholic," explained Medeiros. "We were divided into groups for the service, red, white, blue, the priest was in another group. I got the rabbi." The rosary beads rest at the bottom of the display case with his medals.

Medeiros's time on Normandy sand was brief. Felled by fire almost immediately, he was promptly loaded back on one of the small boats that ferried new fighters ashore and brought back the wounded.

"Helmet on my chest, flattened," recalled Medeiros, peeling back his left shirt sleeve, revealing where he'd been hit. "My [finger]nails all ripped out. I thought I'd lost my fingers. But they were OK."

After a short hospital stay back in England, he was back across the Channel for a second landing at Normandy, and then the months of fighting before, during, and after the fighting at the Bulge.

"If you were warm and walking they wanted you back out there," said Medeiros with a chuckle.

Some not so fortunate

On the day of his last and most severe injury, March 15, 1945, Medeiros was under the command of captain Edward J. O'Melia Jr., the former Holy Cross football star. The award in O'Melia's name is still given to the standout player in the Holy Cross-Boston College football games.

"The nicest guy. Everyone called him "Mother Hen" because of how he looked after us," said Medeiros. "He'd come down and see us. Not all captains did that."

It was O'Melia, recalled Medeiros, who insisted his boys on the front line one day get served pancakes. Because of intense fighting, the flapjacks took three days to arrive, carted in a five-gallon canteen and an accompanying jug of Karo syrup.

"Three days in a canteen," recalled Medeiros. "You can imagine. But for us, it was heaven."

On March 15, less than six months before the war came to a close, Medeiros and O'Melia were riding in a jeep in Belgium. O'Melia was in the front passenger seat and Medeiros behind him. They stopped to pick up a lieutenant, who popped into the back, Medeiros sliding over behind the driver.

"Not much later, they spotted us, going up a hill," said Medeiros, referring to German troops. "The shelling began. The 88s [millimeter]. Our jeep got hit in front,

boom, and the two of us on the left went one way. The two on the right went that way and got killed. We went the other way and got wounded.”

Edward J. O’Melia Jr. was among some 8,000 military dead laid to rest (Plot F, Row 4, Grave 75) at the Henri-Chapelle American Cemetery in Belgium.

Medeiros and daughter Sharon, who lives in Riverside, later this month will begin their annual drive south to see his other daughter, Eleanor, who lives in Melbourne, Fla. The three will be together for Christmas and Arthur will head back to Bristol in March.

“You know, when the cold’s outta here,” he said, warmed by the thought he’ll be golfing three days a week, too, while in Florida.

For his 105th birthday, he figures, he’ll have lunch with Sharon. It likely will be at his favorite spot in Bristol, the Hope Diner, a homey spot across from the bay where the sailboats still glide in the filtered light of a December afternoon sun. “And maybe,” said Medeiros, with not a trace of doubt about his birthday plans, “I’ll play golf.”

There are only good and better days out on the course for Arthur Medeiros.

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