

# Daredevil lands safely after freeing himself from chains, cuffs, locked coffin during skydive

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AP Photo/Joe Silva

SERENA, Ill. (AP) -- A Wisconsin daredevil freed himself from shackles and a locked casket while plummeting to the earth at 130 miles per hour on Tuesday, eventually parachuting gently into a northern Illinois field.

Anthony Martin, 47, waved to the cameras and the crowd that turned out to watch his stunt after he landed at a farm in Serena, Ill., about 70 miles southwest of Chicago.

Martin said the escape was exhilarating but that he was disoriented because the plywood casket whipped wildly from side-to-side while he picked the locks, and he struggled to open the door.

"I didn't feel any force, but what I felt was a lot of jostling," he told The Associated Press. "It seemed to me like I had a glimpse of the ground for a second then it (the door) came back and I had to give it another push."

Martin, who began teaching himself to pick locks at age 6, somersaulted out of the box as he pushed his way to freedom.

"I didn't know where I was ... but I was hypnotized as I watched the box falling behind me," he said.

The mood on the plane was somber as it ascended to 14,000 feet. All the skydivers involved in the stunt carefully checked the others' equipment before Martin climbed into the box and was handcuffed to a belt around his waist and chained to the inside of the casket. A prison door lock for which no key exists was screwed into place to hold the door tight as two of the skydivers checked for sight of the proposed landing area from the open door of the plane, a Short SC.7 Skyvan.

When everyone was ready, a drogue attached to the top of the box was tossed from the door, sucking the casket from the aircraft. A drogue is a small parachute similar to those used to slow drag-racing cars and fighter jets. Two skydivers also held on to handles to further steady the casket as others shot video and stills of the escape-or-die jump.

The box rocked from side to side until around 6,500 feet when the Sheboygan, Wis., man emerged and tracked away from the casket before deploying his parachute.

"It was one of the greatest feelings ever knowing that one of your best friends has again escaped death," said Rook Nelson, a national champion skydiver and owner of Skydive Chicago in Ottawa, Ill. He coached Martin in the weeks leading up to the jump.

Everyone involved in the stunt landed safely and no one was seriously hurt, although one of the skydivers trying to steady the box slammed into the door of the plane as they exited, giving him a fat lip and a scraped arm.

Martin performed the same stunt once before, in August 1988 on just his 17th skydive. He decided he wanted to learn to skydive specifically so he could escape from a casket in freefall. He has chronicled his more than four-decade career as an escape artist in a book released this month, "Escape or Die."

Knocking back reporters' questions about where he ranks himself alongside the escape greats, including Harry Houdini, Martin pondered the question, "What next?"

"This escape will be hard to follow," he said.

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Andrea Thomas, who is an experienced skydiver, was among the six people who jumped with Martin.---