

Glenn Miller

AIR FORCE

ON Dec. 15, 1944, it had been raining in England for three days. The regular military shuttle flights to France were canceled. Maj. Glenn Miller waited impatiently, eager to get to Paris to make arrangements for a Christmas performance by his Army Air Forces band.

When the opportunity arose to hitch a ride across the English Channel on a small single-engine airplane, he leapt at it. The aircraft was a UC-64 Noorduyt Norseman, the military version of a Canadian bush plane. Miller did not fully understand the risk he was taking, nor did he know that the pilot was exceeding his clearance, which was for local flying only.

The airplane took off into the fog from a field north of London at 1:55 p.m. and disappeared into history.

For a while, there was hope that it might have landed somewhere, but it did not turn up. Eighth Air Force officially declared the aircraft missing and made a public announcement on Christmas Eve.

Glenn Miller was at the peak of his fame. He had been the most popular bandleader in America before he joined the Army in 1942. In 1940 alone, his records sold almost three million copies and he had 31 hits in the Top 10 that year.

His AAF band, formed in 1943, was an all-star team. Miller had his pick of top musicians who had been drafted into the armed forces. He was able to pull in several former members of his own band and others who had played with Benny Goodman, Tommy Dorsey, and Artie Shaw.

The Miller sound is the signature music not only of World War II but also of the 1940s in general. Seventy years later, such Miller standards as “In the Mood” and “String of Pearls” are still well-known to new generations of listeners. Speculation also continues about what happened to Glenn Miller. His disappearance is one of the enduring mysteries of the 20th century.

Miller Time

Alton Glenn Miller was born in Clarinda, Iowa, in 1904. He began playing the trombone at age 10, got his first job with a band at age 17, and later dropped out of the University of Colorado to become a full-time musician.

He was just in time for a cultural phenomenon that swept the nation: “big bands” playing a new kind of music called “swing,” an offshoot of jazz with the hard edges smoothed out. The bands,

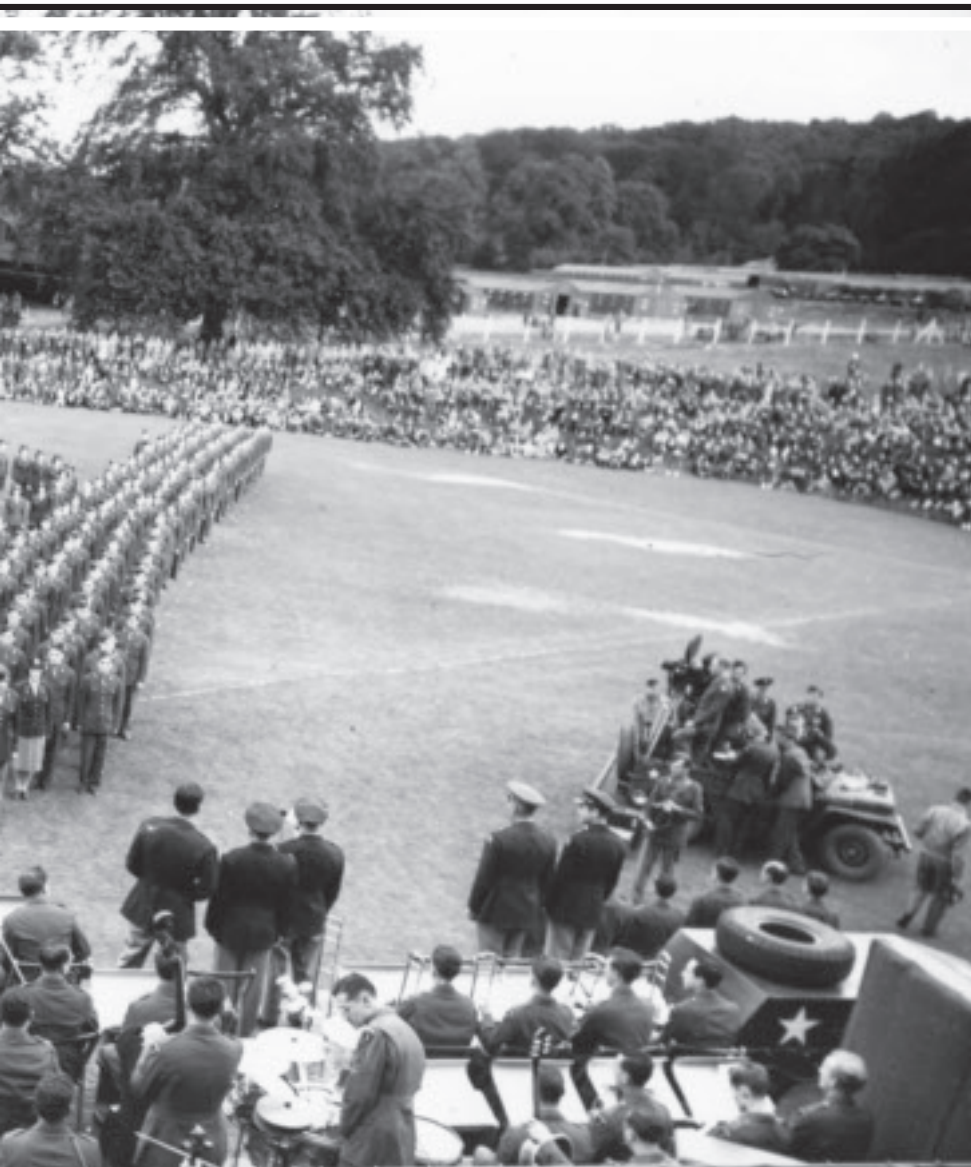


The American Band of the Allied Expeditionary Forces prepares to swing at a war bond rally at Eighth Air Force Headquarters, High Wycombe, UK, in August 1944. Lt. Gen. Jimmy Doolittle and his senior staff stand at left.

Miller's

By John T. Correll

ODYSSEY



He was the leader of the most popular band in the nation and too old to be drafted, but he felt a personal obligation to serve.

Photo via University of Colorado-Boulder Glenn Miller Archive, Alan Cass, and Dennis Spragg

typically 15 to 20 musicians, had strong brass, woodwind, and rhythm sections but seldom any string instruments.

"To many listeners, jazz and swing were the same, but most fans found swing [easier], more listenable, and more suitable for dancing, which was very important for young people of the day," said Joseph Gustaitis in an article for *American History* magazine. "Jazz fans tend to think of their music as art meant for listening only."

The big bands were enormously popular. Fans followed them on records and radio and flocked to personal appearances. They knew the names of the individual players on all of the major bands. There were "hot" bands and "sweet" bands. Benny Goodman, the first of the big band leaders to achieve stardom, played a hard-charging hot style, closer to the original jazz. Glenn Miller exemplified the sweet style, with a slower tempo and tightly controlled orchestration.

Miller did arrangements and played trombone for various bandleaders, including Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey. He was a good musician, but not exceptional. Even when he led his own band, he was never the lead trombonist. His strength was in arranging, organizing, and putting it all together. He had a sense for both business and showmanship, and he was adept at picking players and singers. The classic Miller band had 17 members: Four trombones plus Miller himself, four trumpets, five reeds (clarinets and saxophones), drums, piano, and bass.

Miller's first band in 1937 failed and broke up but he struck gold with his second band, organized in March 1938. The success was largely due to the distinctive sound he developed, which set his band apart. A lead clarinet carried the melody, supported by a tenor saxophone holding the same note and three other saxophones on the harmony. Imitators found it difficult to copy the Miller style and proficiency.

The breakthrough came in 1939 when the Miller band performed to sellout audiences at the Glen Island Casino in New Rochelle, N.Y., and went on to break attendance records up and down the East Coast. Miller had 17 Top 10 hits in 1939, including his theme song, "Moonlight Serenade." *Time* magazine reported that "of the 12 to 24 discs in each of today's 300,000 juke boxes, from two to six are usually Glenn Miller's."

By 1940, the band was broadcasting on the CBS radio network three times a week and recording on the RCA Vic-

tor Bluebird label. “Tuxedo Junction” sold 115,000 copies in the first week of release.

The hits kept coming: “In the Mood,” “A String of Pearls,” “Little Brown Jug,” “Chattanooga Choo Choo”—which sold a million copies—and “American Patrol.” A poll found Miller’s band the most popular in the nation, gathering almost twice as many votes as the Tommy Dorsey band, which finished second. There were more than 500 Glenn Miller fan clubs.

The AAF Band Forms Up

When World War II began, Miller was married and 38—too old to be drafted—but he felt a personal obliga-

tion to serve in the armed forces. “It is not enough for me to sit back and buy bonds,” he said.

He first tried the Navy, which turned him down, declaring it had no need for his “particular qualifications.” He had better luck with the Army, which offered him a direct commission as a captain. Soon after his induction on Oct. 7, 1942, an alert AAF officer discovered “Alton G. Miller” on an Army list, realized who he was, and made a routine request for his transfer to the Air Corps. It was approved without a hitch.

The AAF did not immediately have an appropriate way to use its prize catch. He led bands that played for parades, local dances, and concerts and was

named director of band training for the AAF Technical Training Command. It was not until March 1943 that he organized the group that would be popularly known as the AAF Training Command Orchestra. It was based at the AAF Technical School at Yale University, 80 miles from New York.

The AAF orchestra was larger than Miller’s civilian band. It included string instruments and dozens of musicians drawn from elsewhere in the Army. Miller obtained three members of his own prewar band and his chief arranger, Pvt. Jerry Gray, who had composed “A String of Pearls.” He also got Michael “Peanuts” Hucko, formerly with Benny Goodman but drafted into the infantry. Hucko became Miller’s lead clarinet player. Among those rejected for the AAF band was a 19-year-old piano player named Henry Mancini, who went on to write such works as “Moon River” and the Pink Panther movie theme.

The new band achieved instant national acclaim, broadcasting weekly on CBS and transcribing programs for use by Armed Forces Radio and abroad by the Office of War Information. The band still played for parades, and Jerry Gray’s arrangement of “The St. Louis Blues March” was heard frequently. *Time* magazine said that “old-time, long-haired US Army bandmasters had the horrors,” but the troops loved it.

Miller wanted to go overseas and play for the forces at the front. He had not joined the Army to spend the war in Connecticut. The AAF was reluctant to let him go, partly because of the huge sums his Stateside appearances were raising for war bonds. However, the AI-



Photo via University of Colorado-Boulder Glenn Miller Archive, Alan Cass, and Dennis Spragg



lied Expeditionary Forces were setting up a radio service in Europe—a project of Supreme Allied Commander Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower—and the Miller band got orders to report to England in June 1944.

Broadcasting From Britain

The band arrived in Europe with two officers—Miller and his executive officer, Lt. Don W. Haynes—and 62 enlisted members. Of these, about 40 were musicians. The others were arrangers, producers, administrative personnel, and radio technicians.

The standard billing for the group was the “American Band of the AEF” but it was commonly called the Army Air Forces Band. The big orchestra spun off several smaller units. A dance band, a jazz group, and a string ensemble played separately.

Miller’s chain of command was to the AEF director of broadcasting. The band was based at Bedford, the wartime center for the British Broadcasting Corp., which managed the AEF radio network. For the first week, the programs were carried on the BBC Home Service as well as on the armed forces channels.

On July 14, the stuffed shirts at BBC called Miller in and told him there was a problem. Home Service listeners in fringe reception areas could not hear the softer passages in his music and thought BBC had gone off the air. Henceforth, Miller should keep the volume constant all through the broadcasts.

Miller was astounded. Contrasts and fading were part of the band’s style, well understood by the fans if not by the BBC. (Curiously overlooked by the BBC,

contrasts in volume are also common in classical music.) Miller retorted that he was there to play for the troops, not for confused civilians. The upshot was that the Home Service broadcasts were canceled. In later years, the BBC official who presented the demand to Miller said he did not remember anything about it.

The band was on the air 13 times a week, almost always in live broadcasts, which the BBC managers preferred for reasons of immediacy and topicality. Whenever the schedule permitted, Miller played concerts at camps, airfields, and hospitals, sometimes performing outside in the open. Bing Crosby and Dinah Shore were among the guest stars who appeared with him. Miller mostly confined his participation to conducting although he sometimes joined in with his trombone, especially on “In the Mood” or one of his other favorites.

“Next to a letter from home, Captain Miller, your organization is the greatest morale-builder in the ETO [European Theater of Operations],” wrote Lt. Gen. Jimmy Doolittle, commander of Eighth Air Force, after a concert at High Wycombe.

Miller was promoted to major in August 1944. As the allied forces moved inland from Normandy after D-Day, he clamored for relocation of the band to France, closer to the troops at the front. The BBC managers resisted, fearing

disruption of the radio broadcasts, which were enormously popular.

AEF finally authorized a six-week tour in Europe for the band on condition that in addition to their regular workload, the musicians record six weeks’ worth of backup programming before their departure. The tour would begin with a concert and a broadcast from Paris on Christmas Day.

The exec, Haynes, was supposed to go to Paris to make advance arrangements but Miller decided to go himself. He had an additional purpose: He wanted to meet with AEF officials and try to persuade them to move the band to the continent permanently.

Missing Over the Channel

As Miller chafed under the rain delay on Dec. 15, he and Haynes encountered an acquaintance, Lt. Col. Norman F. Baessell, who said he was going to Paris that day. Baessell was the executive officer for Eighth Air Force Service Command, which also was located at Bedford. A light aircraft, a UC-64A Noorduyt Norseman, was coming to pick him up at the RAF’s Twinwood Farm satellite airfield near Bedford. Miller was welcome to ride along.

The airplane was due in from Alconbury, England, where—unknown to Miller and the control tower at Twinwood—the pilot, Flight Officer John R.

Left top: The wildly popular Glenn Miller band gives a Christmas season performance at Café Rouge in the Hotel Pennsylvania, New York City, in 1941. Left: A prototype C-64, used for testing the aircraft type. C-64s were prone to wing icing, which may have contributed to the crash that killed Miller. Below: Air Force Association founding member and movie star Jimmy Stewart (c) played Miller in 1954’s “The Glenn Miller Story,” a movie based on the musician’s life. Barton MacLane (l) played Gen. Henry H. “Hap” Arnold and June Allyson (r) played Miller’s wife, Helen.



AAF photo



Photo via University of Colorado-Boulder Glenn Miller Archive, Alan Cass, and Dennis Spragg



Left: The Army Air Forces Band recorded albums in addition to performing live. **Above:** The Glenn Miller exhibit at the National Museum of the US Air Force, Dayton, Ohio.

S. Morgan, had been denied clearance for a flight to Villacoublay in France. His clearance was for local flying only with his destination listed as Twinwood Farm.

The regular military shuttles, C-47 and C-54 passenger airplanes, were grounded for weather, although both Eighth Air Force and British Bomber Command launched major strategic missions from England against Germany that day.

The UC-64 arrived at Twinwood at 1:45 p.m. and was on the ground for only 10 minutes. The decision to go was apparently made by Baessell. The airplane was assigned as personal transport for his boss, a one-star general, so Baessell had considerable leverage. According to C. F. Alan Cass, curator of the Glenn Miller Archive at the University of Colorado, Morgan “had likely been bullied to fly” by Baessell and “left his engine idling so as not to have to log an arrival.”

Baessell and Miller climbed aboard. The control tower did not challenge Morgan’s clearance and he took off into the fog at 1:55 p.m. Air traffic control tracked the UC-64 to the English coastline. It did not reappear in the controlled airspace on the other side of the channel and did not respond to radio inquiries.

The band flew to Paris Dec. 18 and—having no reason to doubt that Miller had arrived earlier without incident—was surprised that he was not there to meet them. When the flight still had not turned up on Dec. 20, Eighth Air Force formally declared the flight missing. Miller’s wife, Helen, was notified in a personal telephone call from Gen.

Henry H. “Hap” Arnold, commander of the AAF. The public announcement was made Dec. 24.

Jerry Gray conducted the band in its live broadcast on Christmas Day. The band completed its European tour and continued its broadcasts and concerts until it was disestablished after the war.

Glenn Miller was awarded the Bronze Star, which was presented to his wife in February 1945. The medal was for his contributions to morale. The recommendation already was in the pipeline for approval when he died.

Theories and Strange Tales

All sorts of theories have emerged about what happened to Glenn Miller. Most of these stories can be summarily dismissed as nonsense—or worse.

In a self-published book in 2006, former British Pvt. Clarence B. Wolfe, 82, claimed that his anti-aircraft battery had shot down the Miller airplane near Folkestone on Sept. 9. He had no explanation for Miller’s numerous public appearances in the three months after that.

The most extreme tale was by Hunton Downs in *The Glenn Miller Conspiracy*, published in 2009. As Downs tells it, Miller was a special agent for Eisenhower and was affiliated with the Office of Strategic Services. He was supposedly carrying messages to German generals involved in a plot against Hitler when he was captured in France by Nazi agents, who tortured and killed him in an unsuccessful interrogation.

Another widely reported story gained some credibility despite some of its

weak spots: The UC-64 was blown out of the air accidentally by a British bomber crew. In 1984, Fred Shaw, a former navigator on an RAF Lancaster bomber, said his aircraft, returning from an aborted combat mission on Dec. 15, 1944, jettisoned incendiary bombs in a part of the English Channel designated for that purpose. He saw an airplane at lower level go down amid the bombs exploding below. Shaw said he did not connect it to Glenn Miller until years later. His account was confirmed by the pilot and the flight engineer.

Miller archive curator Cass regards this explanation as less probable than the finding of the official inquiry in 1945, which concluded that an uncontrolled crash into the channel was most likely caused by pilot disorientation. A contributing factor may have been carburetor or wing icing, to which the UC-64A was prone.

The Legend Continues

The Glenn Miller band was reconstituted several times, the first of them in 1946 with Tex Beneke as leader. He had a falling out with the Glenn Miller estate and another version of the band was organized by former Miller drummer Ray McKinley in 1956.

The legacy of Glenn Miller in the AAF is kept alive by the US Air Force Band, which created the Airmen of Note, a 19-member jazz ensemble, in 1950 to carry on the tradition. The group has appeared regularly ever since, performing in uniforms modeled on World War II pinks and greens.

Right: Miller sits in a jeep with drum and bass players of the AAF band in New Haven, Conn., in 1943. The "Jeep Band" was a component of Miller's orchestra. It performed with the marching unit for parades and other events. Below right: Announcer Paul Douglas (l) and W. Wallace Early, an RCA executive, present Miller with the first Gold Record in history for "Chattanooga Choo Choo" in 1942.

A movie, "The Glenn Miller Story," starring Jimmy Stewart and June Allyson as Glenn and Helen Miller, set off a revival of the music in 1954. The Airmen of Note performed as the AAF Band in the movie. Ironically, Henry Mancini, who had been rejected for the band in 1943, wrote the title theme and arranged the music for the film.

In 1994, the US Air Force Band recreated the full AAF orchestra, instrument for instrument, for a 50th anniversary commemoration. The nationwide tour included Carnegie Hall in New York and an appearance in Clarinda, Iowa, where Miller was born. The program for the tour consisted of selections Miller played at his wartime appearances.

The National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences (home of the "Grammys") recognizes three Miller recordings in its Hall of Fame as having particular historic importance: "In the Mood," "Moonlight Serenade," and "Chattanooga Choo Choo."

A memorial to Miller was placed in Arlington National Cemetery in 1992. The control tower at Twinwood has been restored to its original condition. Glenn Miller fans from around the world visit when the tower and the small museum are open during the summer months.

The Glenn Miller exhibit at the National Museum of the US Air Force in Dayton, Ohio, displays Miller's trombone, his summer uniform, cap, and spare glasses, along with sheet music and a music stand used by the Miller band as well as photos, letters, and other artifacts.

In general, the big bands faded away after World War II, as public tastes in music changed. The last of the high-profile big bands was led by Lawrence Welk, who was a fixture on television until he retired in 1982.

The Glenn Miller Orchestra, however, is still touring and getting good reviews in 2013. ■

John T. Correll was editor in chief of Air Force Magazine for 18 years and is now a contributor. His most recent article, "The First Domino," appeared in the October issue.



Photo via University of Colorado-Boulder Glenn Miller Archive, Alan Cass, and Dennis Spragg



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