



When famous bandleader Major Glenn Miller disappeared on a flight across the Channel during 1944 it gave rise to over seven decades of speculation as to what to him. Now, Dennis M Spragg unravels the facts from a tangled web of theories

INTO THIN AIR

English
had happened
and falsehoods.

On 15 December 1944, popular bandleader Maj. Glenn Miller, assigned to Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF), boarded an Eighth Air Force Service Command (VIII AFSC) Noorduyn C-64 Norseman aircraft at the RAF Twinwood aerodrome, Bedfordshire. Piloted by Flight Officer John Robert Stuart Morgan, a former RCAF sergeant pilot, the aircraft was destined for Villacoublay, France. Miller had accepted an invitation from Lt. Col. Norman Baessel, liaison officer for VIII AFSC with the U.S. Strategic and Tactical Air Forces Europe, to accompany him on the routine flight, the aircraft departing Twinwood at 13:55 (British Summer Time). Later, an American C-64 was observed passing over Beachy Head between 14:30 and 14:45 (BST). Then, the aircraft and its occupants simply vanished, with SHAEF not knowing that Miller was aboard the aircraft until 18 December. The Eighth Air Force launched a search and an inquiry on 19 December, but with the absence of evidence to the contrary, they concluded that a catastrophic event had occurred over the English Channel.



LEFT
Major Glenn Miller, who disappeared over the English Channel in 1944. This photo was taken at the BBC on 9 July 1944.

It was determined that the probable causes of the accident was pilot disorientation, mechanical failure, and/or weather. No one has ever found any trace of the aircraft or its occupants.

Alton Glenn Miller was born on 1 March 1904 in the small southwest Iowa farming >>



LEFT
After arrival in Britain, Glenn Miller's Orchestra performed at a number of US bases. This was at a London venue.

BELOW
This concert was at Base Air Depot 2, Warton, on 14 August 1944.

BOTTOM
The B-24 base at Halesworth was another venue where the orchestra performed.

valuable" on the home front. It took the direct intervention of the Supreme Commander in Europe, Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, to force the issue.

On 24 May 1944, Eisenhower requested Miller and his unit for a new Allied radio service; the "Allied Expeditionary Forces Programme" (AEFP) being devised to combine the services of the BBC and the American Forces Network into a "50/50" effort to inform and entertain the forces soon to invade Normandy. The AAF agreed to release Miller and his men for overseas deployment, and on 19 June Miller flew ahead to London. His men arrived at the Firth of Clyde aboard Troopship NY 8245,

community of Clarinda, and into a family of modest means. During a successful career as a jazz trombonist, musical arranger and leader of his own dance orchestra, the brilliant and methodical musician became the number one bandleader in the United States, but following Pearl Harbor, the genuinely patriotic Miller decided that he might best serve his country in uniform. He applied for a commission in the United States Navy, who rejected his application. However, the United States Army was pleased to welcome Capt. Glenn Miller on 7 October 1942 and he was soon transferred to the Army Air Forces and assigned to the AAF Training Command (AAFTC) as Director of Bands. Miller also organised an

elite concert orchestra and radio production unit. Stationed near New York at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, his organisation recorded and broadcast over NBC, for the Office of War Information, Voice of America, Treasury Department, the Armed Forces Radio Service and for Army/Navy "V-Discs."

Narrowly Dodged a Bullet

Miller became a vital asset as a high-profile AAF spokesperson, war-bond salesman and recruiting magnet, the AAF giving Miller "carte-blanche" authority to do whatever he needed to achieve his objectives. When Miller asked if his unit might be sent overseas to "get closer to the action," he was turned down as being "too



the peacetime RMS *Queen Elizabeth*, on 28 June and were briefly billeted at Sloane Court, London, before being moved to Bedford, where the BBC operated wartime broadcasting facilities. Several days later, a V-1 flying bomb hit Sloane Court. The band had narrowly dodged a bullet.

Meanwhile, Capt. Miller's "American Band of the AEF" immediately captured the imagination of Allied forces and the British public alike. To a war-weary people, Miller's elegant music was a breath of fresh air. In addition to their extensive broadcasting schedule, the concert orchestra and sub-units including a dance band, strings ensemble and jazz sextet performed in person throughout the UK for thousands of airmen, soldiers and sailors, while Miller also broadcast psychological-warfare programmes directed at the enemy. He was promoted to Major and received numerous messages of praise from senior Allied officials. Even so, this was not enough for the restless Miller, who jumped at an opportunity to move his unit to Paris and "get closer to the front lines."

Telephone Call Altered History

SHAEF and the AEFP decided to conditionally move the ABAEF to France once broadcasting facilities in Paris and transmission circuits to the BBC in London could be properly established. With the approval of his AEFP chief, Lt. Col. David Niven, Miller agreed to pre-record six-weeks'

of programmes in advance of the move, tentatively set for 15 December.

Miller's men were assigned to Eighth Air Force Service Command HQ at Milton Ernest Hall near Bedford. Miller's administrative officer (and former civilian agent), 2/Lt. Donald Haynes, became closely acquainted with the VIII AFSC HQ commandant, Lt. Col. Norman Baessell. On 14 August, Baessell became the liaison officer for VIII AFSC in Paris, responsible for the construction of a new air service depot on the Far Shore. Baessell was an affluent civil engineer from Washington, DC, who had built air bases in the Caribbean, although the boisterous 44-year old was a well-known womaniser. During several trips ahead to Paris to set up the ABAEF move, Haynes spent considerable time socialising with Baessell, and did not complete his required tasks. This greatly irritated Niven, who on 11 December, summoned Miller to come ahead of his unit to finalise logistics and "deal with Haynes."

Miller had "stuck his neck out" regarding the Paris move, and the Haynes matter only added to his stress. So it was no surprise that on 13 December and 14 December, Miller was frustrated when his authorised form of travel, the scheduled "V.I.P." ATC transport flights from Bovingdon to Paris-Orly, known as "The Marble Arch Line," were both cancelled. But a telephone call from Haynes to Miller mid-day on 14 December would alter history.



ABOVE
The record sleeve for one of Glenn Miller's popular recordings.

A Fatal Trap

Haynes learned that Baessell was planning to fly from nearby RAF Twinwood, (home of the RAF's 51 Operational Training Unit) to Villacoublay near Versailles. His pilot, F/O Stuart Morgan, was standing-by with an VIII AFSC C-64 Norseman at the Second Strategic Air Depot, Abbots Ripton, adjacent to the Alconbury airbase. Baessell invited Miller to hitch a ride, and Miller jumped at the opportunity. Haynes fetched him from the Mount Royal Hotel, London, and they dined with Baessell that evening and then lunched with him the following morning before driving to RAF Twinwood to board the flight.

BELOW
Miller follows the music score during a performance at Bedford on 13 July 1944.

At 08:00 on 15 December Flt Off Morgan, (born 14 June 1922 in Lanark, Hamilton, Scotland) filled out a flight plan at the Alconbury air control desk. Lt. Donald Hope, the traffic officer, denied instrument flight rules (IFR) clearance to Villacoublay due to weather conditions forecast for the Continent, with Allied and German forecasters predicting days of 10/10 overcast skies over the area, which emboldened the Wehrmacht to launch a bold counterattack in the Ardennes on the morning of 16 December.

Morgan was both instrument-rated and experienced at flying across the Channel and over the Continent. Weather at Alconbury and Twinwood was approximately 3,000ft overcast, which dropped to 2,000ft or less at the South Downs, along the coast and over the water. Morgan decided to proceed at his discretion via contact flight rules (CFR), meaning that he had to maintain visual contact with the ground or sea and departed >>



RIGHT Alconbury at 13:25 for the short hop to Twinwood. American GIs in the field listen to a Glenn Miller recording on a portable wind-up gramophone.

Baessell trusted Morgan's ability and judgment and when the men embarked, they saw acceptable weather at RAF Twinwood. What they did not appreciate was that the Eighth Air Force forecast and en-route observations for 15 December reported stratocumulus, cirrostratus, and altostratus cloud layers from sea level upward, which included ideal conditions for icing at lower altitudes. Flying low under CFR rules, Morgan was heading directly into a fatal trap.

Never Seen Again

Neither Miller or Haynes informed their chain of command that Miller was joining Baessell on an



ABOVE Joe Loss, Vera Lynn and Glenn Miller at Burtonwood on 15 August 1944.

unauthorised flight, which SHAEF would have forbidden. Meanwhile, Niven had no idea Miller was coming over with Baessell, who reminded him of a "Hollywood gadfly."

After take-off, Baessell appears to have ordered Morgan to fly directly to Villacoublay because Morgan did not prudently stop at Bovingdon for IFR Cross-Channel clearance and a weather update. The flight was therefore not entered into the air traffic system and C-64 44-70285 was effectively 'invisible' to flying control.

However, Morgan was required to use the SHAEF-mandated air traffic route that directed transport aircraft west of London to a navigational point over Maidenhead; thence, aircraft flew southeasterly to Langney Point (just east of Beachy Head) and from there to either Dieppe or St. Valery and on to the Paris area, with daily VIII AFSC flights to Villacoublay

RIGHT Miller at Burtonwood during a concert there on 15 August 1944.

following the St. Valery course. The corridors were fully equipped with radio-navigation stations, or NDBs, allowing pilots to precisely navigate, although they did so without the benefit of today's "constant contact" air traffic control system, and Morgan was not required to maintain radio contact until he arrived at his destination.

Under IFR rules, Morgan would normally cruise at 5,000ft above the moist low cloud and icing conditions. The ceiling at Langney Point was down to 2,000ft as C-64 44-70285 passed overhead and was duly logged by the Royal Observer Corps.

The Norseman and its occupants were never seen again.

'How the Hell did we lose Glenn Miller?'

On 16 December, when Morgan had not reported in, 35th Air Depot

Group Adjutant, Capt. Ralph Cramer, prepared a routine missing aircrew report. Fully expecting Morgan to report directly, Cramer did not pass along the information to VIII AFSC. He guessed that Morgan's final destination was Bordeaux-Merignac, although VIII AFSC had no operations at Bordeaux-Merignac. A daily VIII AFSC destination and repair facility was located at Brussels-Melsbroek, and this should have been the correct notation. Cramer's error is forever immortalised on the sloppy document, to which the names of Baessell and Miller were later hastily added.

When Miller's men and equipment arrived at Orly aboard three C-47s on a clear and sunny 18 December, Miller



was not at the aerodrome to meet them. Thus began a frantic search to locate the C-64 Norseman and its occupants. SHAEF Assistant Chief of Staff, and head of G-1 (Personnel), Maj. Gen. Ray Barker, who was responsible for SHAEF Broadcasting, thundered: "How the hell did we lose Glenn Miller?"

At once, VIII AFSC ordered the arrest of Baessel, but the Military Police could not locate Baessel, Morgan or Miller anywhere in Paris and anti-aircraft units reported they had not fired on anything and no airfields or aerodromes reported a diversion, while searchers found no wreckage. C-64 44-70285 had simply vanished into thin air. Meanwhile, the emergency created by the German counter-offensive rendered



ABOVE

The head of the Allied Expeditionary Force Programme was Lt Col. David Niven.

LEFT

2nd Lt Donald Haynes (left) was Miller's Admin Officer.

BELOW

8th Air Force Service Command HQ, Milton Ernest Hall, near Bedford.

signature from a qualified air control officer. VIII AFSC HQ knew Miller was joining Baessel and did not stop them. The Second Strategic Air Depot and 35th Air Depot Group unwittingly enabled Morgan to "go all the way" to Villacoublay under CFR rules and contrary to VIII AFSC operational procedure. As a consequence, the commanding officers of all three organisations lost their jobs and the Eighth Air Force tightened navigation, dispatch, authorisation and clearance rules. But it was all too late to save Maj. Glenn Miller.

The International Press Corps, meanwhile, who were assigned to SHAEF knew something was amiss by 19 December, because Miller's unit was in Paris and he was absent, >>

the whereabouts of Maj. Miller insignificant.

Absence Had to be Explained

The Eighth Air Force Deputy Commander for Operations was Maj. Gen. Orvil Anderson, who was married to Miller's first cousin, and, on 19 December, he ordered an investigation. Although he knew a search was hopeless, he ordered all units to carry one out, although survival in the cold water was at best 20 minutes, at which point hypothermia sets in.

Anderson's enquiry culminated on 20 January 1945, with a hearing that established known facts. They were: Baessel authorised his own flight rather than obtaining a counter-





LEFT
Lt Col. Norman Baessell.



RIGHT
Flight Officer John Robert Stuart Morgan, pilot of the C-64 on the fateful flight.

dishonestly claiming that Miller had died of a heart attack in a Paris bordello and that SHAEF was “covering it up.” In reality, three men were missing and the evidence indicated that their aircraft had gone down into the cold waters of the English Channel. But, for decades, the seeds were planted for malicious and baseless conspiracy theories.

Following the war, military authorities chased down and followed-up on many leads concerning aircraft debris and other reports, but all proved to be dead-ends.

Later, inaccuracies were portrayed in the highly successful 1954 motion picture 'The Glenn Miller Story,' based upon the rewrite of a diary

but a ‘gag’ order prevented them from reporting the stunning news until SHAEF issued a formal statement at 18:00 on 24 December 1944. The announcement was withheld until Miller’s wife received an expedited casualty telegram from two senior AAF officers on the morning of 23 December. Miller’s men were appearing on the AEF Christmas Broadcast and Miller’s absence had to be explained. In fact, his recorded voice was heard over AEF until the formal announcement.

Baseless Conspiracy Theories

From the beginning, rumours circulated about Miller’s whereabouts, with Nazi radio station broadcasts

RIGHT
A C-64 aircraft similar to the one in which Glenn Miller disappeared.



BELOW
Abbots Ripton airfield.

that had been kept by Don Haynes, including the illusion that Twinwood was fogged-in during the afternoon of 15 December 1944. Haynes’ mistakes were enshrined in subsequent Miller biographies, and only fuelled the fire of conspiracy theorists and the decades of grotesque and fabricated claims, including the fiction that Baessell was involved in the Black Market.

In 1984, a South African national and former RAF navigator, Fred Shaw, came forward to claim that Avro Lancasters from the RAF’s No. 3 Group had caused the crash of Miller’s aircraft. Aboard Lancaster NF973 of 149 Squadron, Methwold, Shaw recalled he had been able to see a C-64 Norseman below his Lancaster crash into the water amongst the concussions from jettisoned bombs. Shaw’s story gained widespread attention and became cemented in world consciousness as the most likely answer to what happened to C-64 #4-70285, and to Miller.

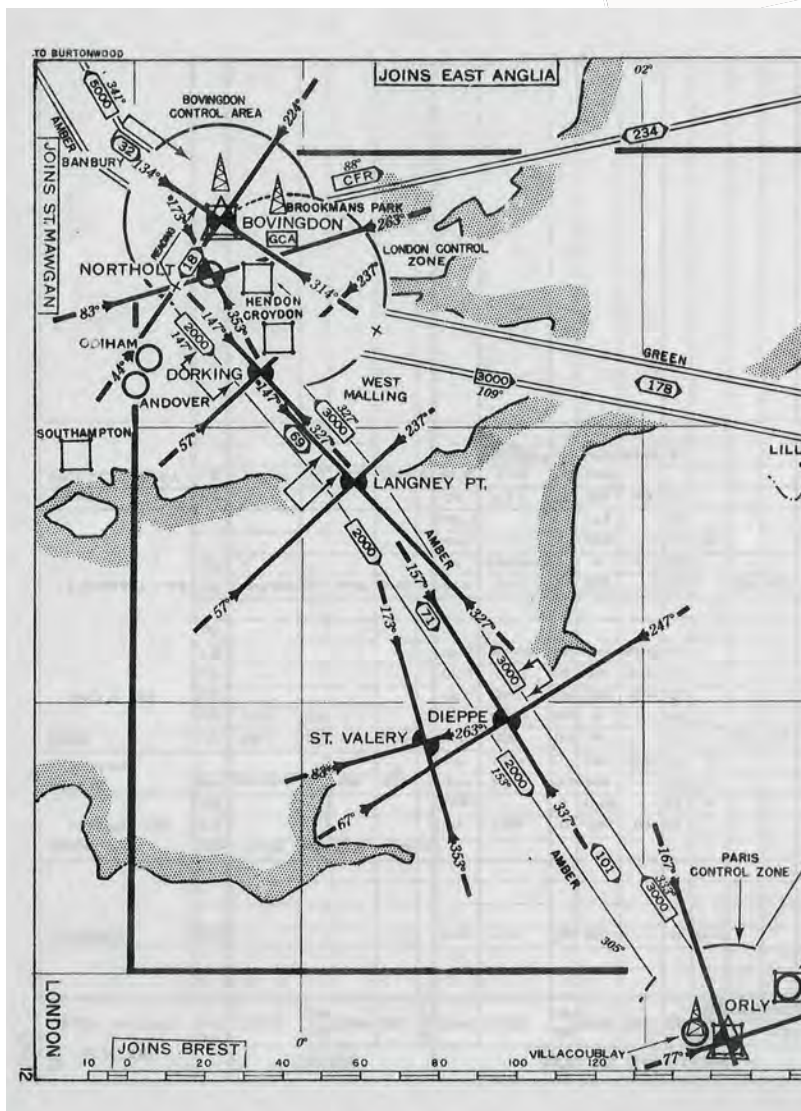


Jettison the Heavy Bombs

On 15 December, the RAF's No.3 Group sent 138 Lancasters on a daylight attack to the railway marshalling yards at Seigen, Germany, which was co-ordinated with USAAF attacks on Kassel and Hanover. All three missions were scheduled to commence at 10.00 BST but the RAF departures were postponed to 11.00 BST. NF973 (with Fred Shaw aboard) took off from Methwold at 11.37 BST. While the Lancasters were en route to target, they were recalled home because their fighter escorts could not take off due to bad weather.

The Lancasters carried 4,000lb 'Cookies' that had to be jettisoned before returning home to land. The aircrew had the option of using designated jettison zones in the North Sea or English Channel, but the procedure was at best imprecise due to low visibility and overcast conditions. Many unfused bombs were hurriedly released north and east of the English Channel co-ordinates of N 50.15 and E 00.15, or directly over the nearby air transport corridor. RAF records show that all of the jettisons on 15 December were completed between 13.04 and 13.21 BST; in other words, before the C-64 had even departed Twinwood. NF973 returned to Methwold at 14.20 BST and all of the 138 Lancasters were home by 14.41 BST.

Support for Fred Shaw's testimony was based upon the contention that Bomber Command had kept time in GMT on 15 December. This misunderstanding supposed that NF973 departed Methwold at 11.37 GMT (or 12.37 BST) and returned



LEFT
A period USAAF route map, showing the air corridor across the English Channel, exiting the British mainland over Beachy Head and Langney Point.

at 14.20 GMT (or 15.20 BST). The time shift was necessary to put NF973 and the other Lancasters on any imaginable intersecting course with the C-64. In reality, according

to unambiguous and logical SHAEF orders, all Allied air, land and sea forces used a uniform time standard and only one clock, which was BST (GMT + 1) during the winter and DBST (GMT + 2) during the summer, and all of the times logged in RAF and USAAF records for 15 December match perfectly.

A ferry flight of little L-1 observation aircraft, however, led by a Supermarine Walrus from RAF Hawkinge, had a frightening encounter with jettisoned bombs between 13:00 and 13:15. The Ninth Air Force 434th Troop Carrier Group complained to AAF and RAF Bomber Commands and the 1 February 1945 issue of "Stars and Stripes" memorialised the report in an article titled "On A Wing and Spray." It is possible that what Fred Shaw may have actually seen was the errant jettison over the ferry flight.

Thus, we may conclude that the RAF did not accidentally kill Major Glenn Miller. >>

LEFT
Morgan, in the right hand seat, acting as second pilot.



RIGHT

Disintegrated on Impact

A Lancaster of 149 Squadron with Fg Off. T E 'Fred' Shaw, third from right.

The VIII AFSC did not outfit its C-64 fleet with de-icing boots, and kilfroast de-icing solution was not applied to C-64 44-70285 before departure. The freezing temperatures and high relative humidity over the Channel created ideal conditions for the formation of ice on the fuselage, wing surfaces, wing interiors, intake vent, venturi and the engine of the C-64. It is possible, therefore, to construct a likely scenario of events which led to the loss of Major Glenn Miller and his two companions.

Distracted by Baessel, Morgan lost situational awareness and effectively mismanaged his aircraft. There really is no other rational explanation, except that a hydraulic fluid leak caused a runaway propeller or that Morgan simply flew the aircraft into the water. Even if he had climbed to 5,000ft and made it safely across the channel, Morgan would still have had to descend through the low overcast and attempt an instrument approach



ABOVE

The official USAAF Missing Aircrew Report detailing the loss of the C-64 in which Glenn Miller was passenger.

into Orly rather than Villacoublay. Alternatively, he may have diverted to another aerodrome, probably in darkness, where he might have then crashed on approach.

The main weight of the Canadian-manufactured C-64 was located in the nose where its Pratt & Whitney engine was mounted. An engine failure in the nose-heavy bush 'plane, loaded with fuel and moving at 145mph, produced a plunge of 246ft per second. At 145mph it took only six seconds to nosedive 1,476ft. A catastrophic event

happened too fast to make a distress call, or to recover the aircraft. The Sitka spruce wood and fabric overlaid steel frame construction of the C-64 would have disintegrated on impact and the aviation fuel onboard may have exploded. The wings, having sheared off their fuselage mounts, may have floated for hours before becoming waterlogged and sinking. The aluminum cabin and its human occupants would have been subjected to blunt force trauma, akin to hitting a brick wall in a speeding automobile, killing Morgan, Baessel, and Miller instantly. Smaller shattered pieces of the machine and human remains may have drifted apart, or sank. The current could have carried the wings eastward, and nothing identifiable ever washed ashore, strongly suggesting a violent mid-channel event, disintegration, and possible explosion. The heavy engine sank straight to the seabed, dragging along the portion of the aircraft still attached, where it remains to this day.

The English Channel is a hectic maritime thoroughfare with thousands of smashed aircraft parts littering the seabed. It would take considerable time and expense to find the needle in a haystack and identify the Pratt & Whitney engine serial number. Debris has probably moved or further disintegrated over the intervening 73 years, due to strong currents and fishermen's trawl nets.

As determined by the Eighth Air Force—and quietly filed away—VIII AFSC, Second Strategic Air Depot and 35th Air Depot Group were jointly responsible for an avoidable accident. In fact, Maj. Glenn Miller was one of the first casualties of the winter weather that enabled the Wehrmacht to launch what we now know as the Battle of the Bulge, his death a pointless catastrophe.

The brilliant musical legend had confidently boarded the wrong aircraft on the wrong day in an attempt to do his duty as he saw it. He paid for that decision with his life. ☹

About The Author:

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