

ALL THAT'S JAZZ

by Tom O'Neill



GLENN MILLER – Part 2 of 2

[This is the thirty-eighth article about legendary figures in the Jazz world, presenting little-known facts about those artists, about whom we thought we knew everything, or as time went on, had forgotten.]

Leaving behind his hugely successful music career, Miller enlisted in the US Army Air Force on October 7, 1942 and was commissioned as a Captain in the Army Specialist Corps. His mission was to boost soldiers' morale by updating the army band with his style of music. After finishing his basic training, he organized the Glenn Miller Army Air Force Band, which caught on with the troops and radio audiences almost immediately. The band's tour and performance schedule was unbelievably hectic, with over 300 personal appearances and over 500 broadcasts in two years. As if this wasn't enough, Glenn also served as the host of the radio weekly, *Sustain The Wings*. Touring cross-country, his AAF band raised millions for the war-bond drives. But once again, Glenn felt it wasn't enough.

In June, 1944, Miller received approval to take the band overseas, closer to where the real action was, to entertain the troops stationed in England. They played 71 concerts in the next five and a half months, prompting one general to exclaim that Glenn's presence was the biggest morale booster for his men, next to a letter from home! Then came the orders to take his show to France and other spots in Europe.

Being a bit of a micro-manager, Miller opted to fly over to Paris himself, in advance of the band's arrival, to make preliminary arrangements for a Christmas concert in the newly liberated capitol. On 15 December 1944, (by then) Major Glenn Miller boarded a single-engine Norseman aircraft at a military strip 40 miles north of London. His plane took off in the dense rain and fog and disappeared forever!

There are dozens of theories as to what happened. Our preoccupied American high command opined that the Norseman had crashed into the English Channel due to wing ice or ice-induced engine failure. That theory fails when you realize the weather data for that day showed a low of 41 degrees F., not cold enough for the afore-mentioned ice. Another theory, proffered by Glenn's younger brother, Herb, was that Miller did arrive in Paris, died in battle with the Germans, and is probably buried in a mass grave at some British military cemetery. Other rumors had Miller as an unlikely participant in a black-market delivery, whereby the Germans shot down the plane, with the horribly disfigured Miller spending months in a hospital, then dying in a Parisian brothel brawl. Unbelievable!

My personal take on the matter is that his adoring public wanted closure; an explanation that would enable them to put the tragedy to rest. To me, the most plausible explanation was suggested by a former Royal Air Force navigator named Fred Shaw.

In 1984, Shaw recalled that he was aboard a Lancaster bomber which was returning from an aborted air-raid on Germany, still then carrying their payload. As the plane approached the southern English coast, the bombardier, in accordance with that era's practice, jettisoned their ordnance which included a 4,000 pound bomb known as a "cookie." As Shaw looked out to see the explosion several feet above the sea's surface, he spotted a Norseman flying below, in the very area the bombs had been dropped. Momentarily, the rear gunner said over the intercom: "Did you see that kite (small plane) go in?" This transmission was later confirmed by the Lancaster's pilot, Victor Gregory. Shaw strongly felt the shock wave from the explosion knocked Glenn's Norseman out of the sky. Wrong place, wrong time!



What really happened? Is it important that we know? Or should we seek solace in the fact that his wonderful music continues to delight at least four generations of audiences around the world. Although the following was not written as Miller's eulogy, it could have served as such. George Simon wrote this in his book *Glenn Miller & His Orchestra*: "His favorite author was Damon Runyon. His favorite book was the Bible. Spencer Tracy and Olivia de Havilland were his favorite actors. His big loves were trout fishing, playing baseball, listening to good music, sleep, and money. His pet hates were bad Swing, early-morning telephone calls (he liked to sleep from 4AM to noon), and the phrase "goodbye now." His favorite quotation, one he stated, was not from the Bible, nor from Runyon, but from Duke Ellington: "It Don't Mean A Thing If It Ain't Got That Swing!" I believe this helps humanize our legend of the man.

His accolades are far too numerous to list here; but thankfully, when in Los Angeles, stop and pause a moment at 6915 Hollywood Boulevard on the Hollywood Walk of Fame for Recording, view his Star, and thank your lucky stars that Glenn Miller has been part of our lives.

Tom and his wife Cheryl perform locally as "Just Me 2", a live music duo specializing in songs from the Great American Songbook. They can be reached at (772) 532-5054 or at www.JustMeLiveMusic.com. See them on Facebook at www.facebook.com/JustMeLiveMusic