

DETAILS OF GLENN MILLER'S DEATH

By Thomas E O'Connel 338th BG

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Why in the world did it take 40 years for the truth to emerge? The answer lies in the word "aborted." If that RAF bomber squadron had completed its bombing mission to Germany, the crews would have been debriefed after the flight was over. At that debriefing they would have been carefully quizzed by trained intelligence officers to find out everything that occurred during the mission. The Lancaster pilot and navigator who have now come forward to tell of the previously forgotten incident of their 1944 flight, would surely have informed authorities of seeing the small plane going into the channel, if that had been the case.

The particular crew in question took off in England, got in formation and headed for their target, the railway yards at Siegen, Germany. Then the weather deteriorated and before the planes crossed into Germany they were ordered back to base. Under such circumstances the procedure in both air forces was to jettison the bombs into the channel. It would have been dangerous to land back in England with those heavy volatile bombs aboard.

There was apparently one key procedural difference between the RAF and the USAF: in aborted missions the RAF bombs exploded and ours were dropped unarmed. Ours didn't explode, they dropped to the bottom of the channel. I don't know why the RAF didn't do it the same way.

I was a bombardier on the crew of a USAF bomber and flew missions from England similar to the one the "Lank" was on. I never armed our bombs until it was absolutely clear we were going to drop them on the target. In the event of jettisoning on an aborted mission, the impact on friendly craft below us would have been much less. Apparently, it was the shock waves from the exploding bombs which caused the little Norseman aircraft carrying Glenn Miller to fall into the sea. If the bombs had been from a USAF plane, Miller might be playing his lovely music even now.

Apparently, the weather was really terrible that day, December 15, 1944.

An early inquiry to the RAF about its possible inadvertent in-

volvement in Miller's disappearance elicited the reply that, "not even the pigeons were flying that day." But recently the RAF crew's navigator, who now lives in South Africa, caused an article about his suspicion of his plane's involvement in Miller's disappearance to be published in a South African newspaper. He thus set in motion a sequence of events which resulted in a further investigation of the RAF records. It turned out that true, no RAF bombing missions were officially recorded for that date, but yes, there was one flight of 150 Lancasters which had been sent out but then ordered back.

What prompted the navigator to remember now that his fellow crew members had seen a Norseman D-64 crash in the channel that day after their jettisoned bombs had exploded? He saw a rerun of the movie, The Glenn Miller story in South Africa. As a further irony, he had first seen the movie in 1954, and had realized that his crew's bombs might have been responsible for Miller's death. But when he approached newspaper reporters on the matter they didn't pay any attention.

Of course, there were lots of airplane accidents over England and the English Channel during that period. Thousands of us bomber crews were zipping all over the sky going to continental Europe and coming back. Most of us had little training compared to today's airline crews, and air control systems were nothing like the sophisticated current ones. My crew got to England about six weeks after Glenn Miller's disappearance. By that time our planes were so numerous that there was more danger to us young bomber crews in our chaotic daily pre-dawn rendezvous with planes from our own squadrons than there was from enemy action over Germany. Losing one small Norseman D-64 was no big deal.

What made it important, of course, was that Glenn Miller was on it and he was everybody's darling. His sweet music stood for peace and for good times past and -if we all made it back-yet to come. I remember his death as a personal loss. It was so to millions of us, somewhat the way John Lennon's death was to my current students and their contemporaries.

Historian Lillian de La Torre once advanced a theory that ran something like this: any historical mystery will eventually be solved if there is sufficient continuing interest in it so that curious investigators are prompted to explore it for long enough. Glenn Miller's death was such a long standing mystery. I'm glad it is solved after 40 years.

The End