



Photo Commonwealth War Graves Commission

Caverfield (St. Lawrence) Churchyard
Oxfordshire England

THE MILLER FAMILY

Hastings, Hawke's Bay

Walter McNair Miller – Caroline Manners Miller (Gascoigne)

1883 - 1950

1875 – 1968

I remember few of my parents' friends from my childhood in Waipawa and Hastings., but the one I have particular memories of is Henry Algernon Gascoyne Miller from a well-known Hastings family. Henry's father, Walter McNair Miller was the son of the Chief Stock Inspector for Hawke's Bay who later became Inspector of the New Zealand Agricultural Offices throughout the country. Walter Miller and his bride Caroline Gascoigne, daughter of Henry and Emily Gascoigne of Waimate, were married at historic St Matthew's Anglican Church in King Street, Hastings in September 1903.

Heritage listed St Matthew's Church was built in 1886 and is one of New Zealand's oldest churches. Although damaged in the 1931 earthquake it was soon restored with the tower rebuilt to a reduced height.

At various times the maternal surname was spelt Gascoigne but in the Miller family, the children's names were spelt as Gascoyne. In fact both families had a military history as Henry's father, Walter, fought in the South African ('Boer') War 1899-1902. Caroline's uncle, Major F J W Gascoigne of The Bungalow, Hastings, fought in the colonial army land disputes with North Island Maori tribes during the 1860s and early 70s..

Walter Miller served in the Hawke's Bay Civil Service Rifles, one of the various Volunteer Militia of the time, as a Private for three years. His occupation at the time was a clerk. Following the outbreak of the South African War (1899-1902) and Premier Richard Seddon's offer of New Zealand troops to the British government, hundreds of men volunteered. Walter enlisted in the New Zealand Defence Force in March 1901 at the age of 21 and prepared to sail for South Africa.

Walter joined the 21st Contingent with the rank of Sergeant. He was seriously wounded in a major engagement with the Boers in March 1902 at Botha's Berg. Near the end of June 1902 he became dangerously ill with enteric fever (typhoid) and was admitted to Harrismith Hospital. Typhoid was the major cause of sickness and death during the war.

Following his recovery and discharge from Harrismith Hospital on 15 September 1902, Walter was granted leave of absence from 17 September and embarked from Cape Town on the SS Athenic for New Zealand the next day. He was invalided out of the Defence Force and, following arrival in Wellington, was discharged. He returned to civilian life then went to live at Napier.

Walter Miller was awarded the South African War Medal and also received Clasps for service in the Transvaal & Orange Free State. He received a war pension in 1922.

The Miller Children

Frederick Walter Gascoyne Miller	19 September 1904 – 12 October 1996
Marion Amy Gascoyne Miller (Van Asch)	24 June 1906 – 10 March 1997
Constance Mary McNair Miller	13 July 1908 – 21 August 2009
Ruth Cecil Bonar Miller (Faulkner)	5 October 1911 – November 2001
Henry Algernon Gascoyne Miller	1914 – 13 August 1940
Francis Bamber Gascoyne Miller	1917 – 2 August 2013



Photo Auckland War Memorial Museum

RAF Bicester, England May 1940

RNZAF Sgt Pilot

Henry Algernon Gascoyne Miller

1914 – 13 August 1940

Henry was one of six children and only 25 when he died. It is therefore ironic that each of his five siblings lived until their 90s. Indeed one sister, Constance Mary McNair Miller, a well-known educationalist and school principal, was 101 when she died of pneumonia in Duart Hospital, Havelock North.

Henry was born in 1914 when his parents were living at Maori Hill, Dunedin North. His father was a civil servant who in the course of his career with the Department of Agriculture was moved to positions in North and South Island towns.

Henry first went to school in Dunedin, but later attended high school in the North Island when his family was living in Masterton and he may have attended the Wairarapa High School. However it is more likely, as he was of a practical nature and interested in engines, he attended Masterton Technical School. In 1937 both schools were merged to become Wairarapa College. Later, when the family returned to live in Hastings, Henry qualified as a motor mechanic while, possibly, working at Thompson Brothers garage.

No doubt he met my parents, Natalie (Partridge) and Mason McCormick, sometime in the early 1930s or, possibly, as late as 1937 while they were living in Hastings with Mason's widowed mother in Lyndon Road East. However it is more likely he met Natalie first when her family was living at 616 Nelson Street, not far from the Miller family home in Nelson Street. Natalie's father, Fredrick Partridge, was Hawke's Bay Manager for the Vacuum Oil Company from 1931 to mid 1933 when he retired early due to ill health and retired back to the family home in Sumner, Christchurch.

Living in Hastings working as a motor mechanic, Henry showed a keen interest not only in car and truck motors, but also in flying as a hobby. He soon joined the Hawke's Bay and East Coast Aero Club. The club was co-founded in 1928 by Mr P Van Asch (who subsequently pioneered aerial photography in New Zealand) and Captain W T White at Longlands, but is now at Bridge Pa, Hastings.

Henry first flew solo in March 1937 and later worked at the airfield as aerodrome clerk. Then, in October 1938, he was placed on the RNZAF Civil Reserve list as a pilot. He was granted his "A" Licence, private pilot's licence on 28 November 1938.

My specific memory of Henry relates to the occasion in 1939 when he took my father and me for a flight over Napier in an Aero Club Tiger Moth. Introduced into service in 1931, the open cockpit De Havilland Tiger Moth is a single-engine biplane and continues to be popular with flying enthusiasts.

Many of these sturdy biplanes are still flying from private airfields throughout the country. They were a favoured aircraft for many student pilots as well as 'old time' airmen and present-day airline pilots who enjoy flying 'real' planes as a hobby. Thrill seekers throughout New Zealand and Australia continue to enjoy the unique experience of flight as passengers in these sturdy open-cockpit aircraft.

From childhood, I remember Henry as a smiling, friendly visitor who enjoyed company. He had the unique party trick of crafting small goblet cups from the silver paper that lined cigarette packets in those days. These he would flick up to stick to the ceiling. He was a frequent visitor to my parents' house when they lived at 'Mount View' on Windsor Hill overlooking the town of Waipawa.

Following the declaration of war against Germany by New Zealand on 3 September 1939, Henry, along with other pilots on the Civil Reserve list, was immediately mobilised and posted to the RNZAF Levin/ Ground Training School as a Pilot under Training from 26 October 1939. At the time war was declared the RNZAF had a complement of 91 pilots and a few mostly obsolete planes.

Henry Miller (No. 39929) gained his Pilot's Badge and passed out from Levin on 7 March 1940 and on 4 May was promoted to Sergeant-Pilot. On 24 May 1940 he, with other airmen, embarked on the RMS Mataroa for England. The Mataroa arrived at the port of Bristol on 9 July 1940 after an uneventful voyage. Henry never returned to New Zealand



Henry Miller in Hastings, April 1940
Photo © Barrie McCormick

The RMS Mataroa was launched in 1922 by Harland & Wolf at Belfast for the Aberdeen Line. However it was soon chartered by the Shaw Savill & Albion Shipping Line and following the outbreak of war was quickly converted to become a troop carrier. The ship would normally carry 131 Cabin class passengers in peacetime, but as a troop carrier the embarking airmen and military personnel travelled in less luxurious surroundings. After the war the RMS Mataroa resumed commercial passenger and cargo services from Southampton to New Zealand via the Panama Canal until being scrapped in March 1957.

From Bristol the enthusiastic young New Zealand airmen went to 1 Depot at RAF Uxbridge in the London Borough of Hillingdon. During the war this was the headquarters of No 11 Group RAF which was responsible for the air defence of London and south-east England. The underground bunker built nearby was the operations centre controlling air support for the evacuation of Dunkirk and D Day landings. From Uxbridge Henry was posted on 27 July 1940 to No. 13 Operational Training Unit/RAF at RAF Bicester, on the outskirts of the town of Bicester, Oxfordshire. The airfield dates from 1916 as a military airfield when it was established as a training depot for the then Royal Flying Corps.

No 13 OTU was formed in April 1940 to meet the needs of the squadron of No 2 Group Bomber Command. Established in 1916, RAF Bicester was mostly used as a training station during both wars. The RAF finally left in 2004. The airfield is now under civilian ownership and used only by private light aircraft and the Windrushers Gliding Club as well as the Oxford University Gliding Club.



Bristol Blenheim Bomber
Photo Google image

Immediately after arriving at Bicester, Henry and his fellow aircrew began intensive training in Bristol Blenheim light bomber aircraft. The aircraft was powered by two Merlin XV radial engines and carried a crew of three; pilot, navigator-bombardier and wireless operator air-gunner. The Blenheim was designed and built by the Bristol Aeroplane Company and the prototype first flew in April 1935. It entered service with the RAF in 1937 and was used extensively in the early days of WW2 for daylight bombing raids for No 6 Group RAF Bomber Command.

However its slow speed, 250 mph, and light armament of dorsal turret and port wing machine guns, as well as forward under the nose blister, soon proved no match against the superior speed and manoeuvrability of the fighter planes of the Luftwaffe. Increasingly heavy losses led to the Blenheim being withdrawn from operational actions in Europe in mid-1942.

Nevertheless, the Bristol Blenheim was successfully adapted for night operations and continued to be flown in most theatres of war until 1944. From 1942 the Blenheim was increasingly used for training purposes.

On 13 August 1940 while piloting a Blenheim Mark 1V on a training flight doing circuits and landings at RAF Bicester, Henry experienced an engine failure and the plane stalled when he turned desperately attempting to clear nearby trees.

The plane crashed. His crew survived, but Henry died in hospital from his injuries a few hours later. Henry's Log Book for Blenheim bombers recorded a total of 6 hours flying Solo and 8 hours Dual training. For all types of planes, which included his flight hours in New Zealand, Henry's flying time totalled 53 Dual and 189 Solo. Henry's flying career was a total 256 hours.

Henry Algernon Gascoyne Miller is buried in Caverfield (St.Lawrence) Churchyard, just north of Bicester, Oxfordshire, England. Sadly Henry saw little of the land of his forebears.

As a postscript to Henry's death, it should be remembered that, particularly in the early days of the war, there was an alarmingly high rate of fatalities amongst young, inexperienced aircrew. Crash reports for all types of aircraft not infrequently describe engine failure during training, on take-off, during flight, or when landing.

Had it been peacetime, perhaps accident reports may well have commented on factors other than the actions of a pilot. The causes of engine failure and the maintenance standards for a particular aircraft would have been more closely examined, as they would be today.

Probably, like most of the pilots, the mechanics were young and with limited experience of the particular aircraft and engines they worked on when under great pressure to get planes back in the air as quickly as possible. Thus it is not unreasonable to assume some instances of engine failure, resulting in fatalities, may have been due to mechanical causes resulting from a workshop mistake or oversight. And not simply pilot error, or "bad airmanship", as noted on the 'Air Ministry Form 1180, RAF Flying Accident Card' for 'Pilot H G Miller'.

References and Acknowledgements

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Commonwealth War Graves Commission

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Pilot's Name		MILLER H G		TOTAL HOURS FLOWN			
Rank	Date of Wings	Nature of Commission	Dual before Solo on Training Type	Dual before Solo on Service Type	SOLO	DUAL	TOTAL
Sgt	39929		TYPE	TYPE	64	1978	2042
Period since Wings		Date of Birth	Accident Type	Others	189	53	242
Years	Months	Typed at	Total		195	61	256
Age when Qualifying		Age at date of accident	Instruments		During last six months		Night Flying Total
<p><i>Opinion: Pilot was not in possession of wings at time of accident. Pilot was not in possession of wings at time of accident. Pilot was not in possession of wings at time of accident.</i></p>		<p><i>1905. has several directions concerning</i></p>		Type	Type	Type	Type
<p><i>1905. has several directions concerning</i></p>		<p><i>1905. has several directions concerning</i></p>		Others	Others	Others	Others
<p><i>1905. has several directions concerning</i></p>		<p><i>1905. has several directions concerning</i></p>		Total	Total	Total	Total

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