

GLENN MILLER'S MOUNTAIN CONNECTIONS
By Robert Williamson

One of my favorite movies starring Jimmy Stuart is the 1954 academy award film about trombone player, band leader / music arranger, Glenn Miller. From 1939 to 1944 he was very popular for his swing music, the "Miller Sound", featuring his signature tune, "Moonlight Serenade". Can you imagine what a thrill it was to discover that Glenn Miller plays a significant role in our "Mountain Memories" story for December?



In 1944 the popular orchestra leader joined the armed service and was appointed Director of the United States Army Air Force Band to bring his music to the troops in Europe.

Photo courtesy bm / images

In June 2019 my wife Eileen and I joined 1,000 special guests commemorating the 75th Anniversary of D-Day at Canadian Warplane Heritage Museum's Gala on Hamilton Mountain. We were entertained by a modern version of Glenn Miller's Orchestra in a 1944 military setting surrounded by aircraft representing that time period. Centre stage in the giant aircraft hanger was the famous twin engine C-47 (DC-3) that actually flew many missions during the D-Day invasion.

Far less conspicuous on the edge of the dance floor, hiding in "plane" sight, so to speak, was a Canadian built Noorduyn C64 Norseman, a small transport aircraft. As I studied the aircraft, bathed in Miller's beautiful music, I realized that I was looking at the aircraft type that carried the famous band leader to his death on December 15, 1944. It was transporting him from the RAF Station in Bedford, north of London, to Paris for an armed forces morale-building performance at Christmas. Touching the aircraft and listening to the strains of "Moonlight Serenade", created a sensation of overpowering nostalgia.



Noorduyn C-64 Norseman military transport courtesy CWHM

According to an aircraft spotter, the flight path of the Norseman, took Miller over Reading to the west of London and across the English Channel in an East Southeasterly direction at about 2:00 p.m.. The winter weather over the channel was very poor with heavy cloud and fog severely reducing visibility. The aircraft never reached France. It is believed that the Norseman strayed into a restricted bomb jettison zone as Lancaster bombers, returning from an aborted bombing mission over Germany, released their dangerous cargo. This was a standard safety precaution before attempting to land at their airbase. The time of day fits their returning raid schedule.

As the Gala evening drew to a close, I wondered how many Mountain residents are totally unaware of our local connection to Glenn Miller's mysterious and tragic death. I pondered this association for several weeks as the Norseman aircraft sat unobtrusively in its Mount Hope hanger.

Unexpectedly, as the anniversary of Miller's disappearance approached, my niece, JoAnn Devlin, while sorting through her late father's memorabilia, discovered a letter dated **November 15, 1944**. It was from a fellow veteran, LAC Ron Kearns, Number 432 RCAF Bomber Squadron. He described how he was given a three day pass to London to take in a live Glenn Miller show at Picadilly Circus. He hoped the enemy V-1 buzz bomb attacks didn't close it down. At the time, Glenn Miller had only a few short weeks to live.

That letter's content was mesmerizing. It recalled a scene from the movie in which the actor, Jimmy Stuart, conducted the orchestra at an army camp show. Distracted, his eyes are shown following the sound of a passing buzz bomb. It's the stuff that great stories are made of and contributes to the remarkable reality of this "Mountain Memories" anecdote.

Robert Williamson writes this monthly Mountain News column for the Hamilton Mountain Heritage Society

American version of the C-64 Norseman military transport

