

# **Robert George Miller**

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## Robert George Miller

Today is May 16, 1994. My name is Charles Nelson and I am a volunteer with the Midway Village at Rockford, Illinois, which is cooperating with the statewide effort to collect oral histories from Illinois citizens that participated in the events surrounding World War II. We are interviewing Robert Miller who participated in the Army Air Force during World War II.

**NELSON:** First give us your full name, place and date of birth.

**MILLER:** My name is Robert George Miller. I was born here in Rockford, Illinois, a second-generation native born January 15, 1919.

**NELSON:** We would also like to have the names of your parents.

**MILLER:** I am the son of Adolph and Hilda Miller.

**NELSON:** Did you have any brothers and sisters?

**MILLER:** I had one sister, Mary Jane Nelson.

**NELSON:** Are there any details about your parents and/or your family that you would like to share.

**MILLER:** I don't believe so.

**NELSON:** What was your life like before the war, specifically during 1941.

**MILLER:** I worked at the Rockford Machine Tool Company. It was engaged in the war effort out there making machine tools, so I had a deferment out there. But I felt like had—wasn't doing enough for the war effort so that's the place I was when I enlisted in the service.

**NELSON:** How did you hear of December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1941, the bombing of Pearl Harbor by the Japanese?

**MILLER:** I had been married 2 years at the time. I had built a house a year before we got married. It took me a year to build the house. I carried my bride over the threshold in our new home in October of 1940. I was just in this house on December 7<sup>th</sup> 1941. My wife and I were having company over for dinner, her three brothers and a cousin, all males. So we stayed home from Sunday school and church that Sunday to prepare for this meal. As we were sitting in our dining room with the radio turned on, we always had music going in the house, during the eating of the meal, maybe half way through, the radio was interrupted by a special bulletin informing us that Pearl Harbor had been bombed. It was such a shock that I don't believe we finished our meal but we just sat around listening to the radio for the entire afternoon, trying to get all the reports in on this tragic event.

**NELSON:** Had you formed any prior opinion or developed any feeling about what had been taking place in Europe or Asia?

**MILLER:** Yes, but I didn't know too much about what was happening with Japan. I really wasn't looking for any problem there. I was concentrating all my efforts on the European problem with this mad man going loose over there, taking one country after another, lying to everybody he talks to. So I knew that he was someone who had to be stopped and stopped quickly.

**NELSON:** What event led you to enter military service?

**MILLER:** Like I said, I was in the war effort in a small way in the machine shop, but I felt like I wasn't doing enough. I wanted to get directly involved. So about ten months after the bombing of Pearl Harbor I enlisted in the service.

**NELSON:** Do you have any special memories of this event?

**MILLER:** Yes. Enlistment was a little unique in a way in that it has held on through these many,

many years. I went out to Camp Grant with a high school buddy of mine, Franklin Lindgren, who after the war was the chief pilot for Ingersoll Milling Machine Company. We went out there to Camp Grant and took our examinations, qualifying exams for the aviation cadet program. We both wanted to get into fly. Unknown to us, one of our other close friends went out there the next day and took an exam. His name was Stanton Olson. Who was a navigator in the war. Well anyway, we both passed our exam and Stan passed his. A couple months later we all—the three of us got a letter together, at the same time, ordering us to report into Chicago for induction. So as I said, I had been married. Franklin had been married the same amount of time, so our wives drove us down to the I. C. (Illinois Central) depot on South Main Street. Stanton Olson was taken down there by his mother and father. They're a wonderful Christian family from the Tabor Lutheran Church. The three of us rode the train together from the I. C. Railroad going downtown Chicago to a large warehouse where there were many, many hundreds of young fellows just like us, just being inducted into the service. We got on a train and it took us down to Texas for our basic training.

**NELSON:** How old were you at that time?

**MILLER:** I was 23 years old when I went in.

**NELSON:** Did anything special happen there during your training?

**MILLER:** During the training, of course, that was very exciting for any young man going into the flying program. After we took our basic training at Sheppard Field down in Texas we were assigned to college training at Texas Tech, Lubbock, Texas, and we were there for five months. During the five months they gave us a concentrated two year college course. It was very exciting and challenging. From there we went out to California to Santa Ana to pre-flight training.

**NELSON:** Did you have any leaves or passes?

**MILLER:** Yes, we had a few. Well, no leaves. We had our weekend passes. Franklin Lind-

gren's wife and my wife lived in town and they worked in town. They followed us all over the country. We got to see our wives on the weekends. That was the only pass that we really had.

**NELSON:** What was your military unit?

**MILLER:** My overseas unit?

**NELSON:** Well...

**MILLER:** From Santa Ana pre-flight we went into the actual flight training program which is three phases—primary, basic and advanced. I took my primary flight training up at Tulare, California, in the San Joaquin Valley at the Techs Rankin Aeronautical Academy. That's where I learned how to fly. The first time I soloed in the Stearman bi-plane. I was really lucky there. I was one of the few who had a World War I ace fighter pilot as an instructor. The most ironic part of it is, he was a German. He flew for the German Air Force in World War I, but he was the finest flight instructor a man could ever have. Anyway, after primary training, I went a little further up the valley, San Joaquin Valley, to \_\_\_?\_\_\_, California, which is the gateway to Yosemite Park, and took the basic training up there in the old \_\_?\_\_ vibrator and then from basic training went down to Fort Sumner, New Mexico, for advanced flight training in the AT-17 Cessna Bobcat. While we were at Fort Sumner, New Mexico, on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of May, 1944, that I received my wings, silver wings as a pilot, and a commission as a 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant in the United States Army Air Corps.

**NELSON:** When you were sent overseas, how did you get there?

**MILLER:** I'll pick it up from graduating. I had to—after graduation, we were sent home for one month. Then I reported—down in Missouri to the troop carrier command for five months transition flying in a C-47 Douglas plane which is a transport plane for troop carrier. This is what I wanted all along. I felt fortunate getting into this. I didn't want to get involved in the shooting end of the war. My conscience and my make up wouldn't really allow me to go out and to kill

people. I knew it had to be done but I didn't want to be the one to do it. I wanted to get into something else that was just as important to our effort but it would be something that would be in a more helpful way. I asked for troop carrier ATC work and I got troop carrier which was fine because when we did get overseas I hauled hundreds of wounded and brought them back to the hospitals and was helpful in that way and I brought gasoline and food into the men on the ground that needed it badly. Well anyway after my transition flying I went to Bear Field, Indiana, and on our way overseas, I was assigned an airplane, brand new C-47 "B" model, and we checked it out. I flew it for a couple days with my crew and we were given clothing but that was the disappointing end of it. We were so happy with the airplane, we wanted to go—but I had my eyes on Europe but the clothing they gave us—wrong time of the year—they gave us summer clothes. So we knew we were going to go to the Pacific instead of the European Theater. A couple days later they called me in and told me I had to turn in my plane. I had to sign it off. That was disappointing. I thought maybe we were going to get a different model or whatever. But then after that, they asked us to turn in our clothes. We turned in our "suntans." They issued us winter clothes. So then we knew we were going to go to Europe. We waited for a couple days and didn't get a new airplane assignment. That was real disappointing but instead of that we got notice that we were going to get on a train and go to New York so we knew it was going to be by boat. When we got off the train, got off at the dock there and we looked up at that huge thing up there. I really didn't know what it was, but it was the Queen Elizabeth, the largest ship afloat in the world. There were 18,000 of us on that ship when we left New York—four day journey over to Scotland. That was the beginning of our tour in Europe.

**NELSON:** If you did not immediately enter the combat zone, where did you go after entering combat?

**MILLER:** From Scotland, we went down to the Midlands, the first day, and got our assignments at Stone, England. And from Stone, we went down to Basingstoke, England, which is about

70 miles west of London and I was assigned to the 434<sup>th</sup> Troop Carrier Group with the 71<sup>st</sup> Squadron. On the first day with this Squadron, I was on a mission, across the Channel, over into France.

**NELSON:** Can you list for us in order of occurrence all subsequent combat action in which you were involved?

**MILLER:** One of the very first bigger missions, more important missions, I participated in was the Air Relief Drop at Bastogne, Belgium. A big group of our men were down on the ground—down there at Bastogne—totally surrounded by the Germans and they had run out of supplies. They were short on food, ammo and gas, but more short on the ammunition than anything else. There was only one way to help these fellows out was to give them a huge air drop. So I went in there three days in a row and dropped supplies to these men. Rather cloudy conditions the first couple days but our group—our small group—we were only nine planes in our group that we found a hole and went down through it—went underneath it—we saw the fellows down there and they had the ground well marked for us. They were waving at us. You could see them very clearly. We dropped their supplies right on top of them. So that was really exciting. The only thing is we lost a couple planes on the first day mission when we went under the clouds and dropping ours right on the boys. The fellows that didn't get under the clouds were dropping their's by parachute. The chutes were coming right down on top of us. They were hitting their targets but they were hitting us, too, and we lost two planes that day.

**NELSON:** Did your mental attitude change as combat continued?

**MILLER:** Oh, yes, it sharpened and it made us more furious as time went on. We wanted to get this thing done. We thought it would be finished sooner than it had but we had to put up a terrific fight.

**NELSON:** Did you write any letters home?

**MILLER:** Yah. Many letters. Of course, being a married man, I was writing almost every day. My wife was writing. We had our letters numbered. We had a little secret code. I even had a map so that—and she had a map so I could tell her exactly where I was when we looked at our maps. That was fun.

**NELSON:** Did most of the other men receive letters?

**MILLER:** I'd say most of the men did, yes. And everyone was so good. Somebody got a big box of cookies or whatever, he'd share them with everyone else. It was the same thing with mine. I'd share them with my buddies.

**NELSON:** Did you forge close bonds of friendship with many of your combat companions?

**MILLER:** Not a great many but my co-pilot and I have maintained a very close relationship during the years. He's a fine, fine gentleman, a fine Christian man. He lives down in Kentucky and I've been in his home about ten times, I'd say, over the years, and we had some very enjoyable times together. It's sad right now, he's in a nursing home. I went down to see him this last year again. I keep close contact. Our radio operator is down in Oklahoma and I've kept in contact with him, too.

**NELSON:** What is the highlight occurrence of your combat experience?

**MILLER:** I think the highlight of it was flying my plane back home after the war. That was a long, long flight with a little twin engine C-47, you know, and can't go straight across the ocean with that little thing. It was big, in a way, but it was still too small for a cross Atlantic flying. We left to France and went down to Marrakech, Africa, and Dakar, Africa; down to Roberts Field in Liberia. From Liberia, we flew over to Ascension Island which is about a little bit better than one-third of the way across. We flew to a little tiny island only a mile and a half long in the middle of the Atlantic. We had to find that thing by ourselves. Then from Ascension Island we flew over to Natal, Brazil. Then up to Belem, Brazil. I never knew Brazil was so big until I

had to make that flight. We finally ended up in Georgia with my plane. That was a nice long flight.

**NELSON:** Tell us about what you and the other men did to celebrate America's traditional holidays such as Thanksgiving and Christmas.

**MILLER:** I'm always real thankful to go out for looking after me and my family all these years and I've got fifty-two years of marriage in already and for Christmas and Thanksgiving and all, I'll tell you most of our thanksgiving is to the God for looking after us and keeping us together.

**NELSON:** What happened when you arrived in the United States?

**MILLER:** There was an interesting time, too, because I left my plane down in Georgia and I hated to say good bye to the "old bird" so I had a little—all of us G.I.s carried a little GI knife in our pocket and it had a lot of tools on it. One of them was a screw driver. So I pulled it out of my pocket and I took the clock off the instrument panel and I've still got that home on my desk today. I took a train up to Fort Sheridan here and then was home for a month. We got a one month leave and my orders were to report out to California, pick up another new airplane and go to the Pacific and end the war over there. During my thirty days home, the two atomic bombs were dropped which changed everything. We didn't know what was going to happen but I still had to—at the end of my thirty days I had to go out to California and report in out there. And there we stood. Really tens of thousands of us fellows out there in California, on their way to the Pacific and they didn't know what to do with us. So we sat there for about three months waiting and waiting and waiting—just reading the bulletin board every day to see what was going to happen. Finally we were discharged out there so I didn't get to go to the Pacific.

**NELSON:** Tell us about your military rank and decorations, especially your campaign decorations.

**MILLER:** Well, I don't usually go into that much. I break down a little bit when I think about this. My youngest son, our fourth child, graduated from the University of Illinois Architectural School. He graduated about six years ago. During his fourth year at the university, he took a one year course over at Versailles, France, which is just outside of Paris. It's an extension of the University of Illinois. The French Architectural School at Versailles. During the Easter Holiday, he said he had time and he wanted us to go over there and visit him. He said, "I'm lonesome for you."

**NELSON:** If you'd rather not talk about this, that's fine.

**MILLER:** Well, anyway, young Phil is very close with us. My wife and I jumped at the invitation so we went over there and spent three weeks over there. I got to visit with Phil. We rented a car. As the war went on after England, we moved over to France. We moved over to Mourmelan, France which was about twenty miles southeast of Rheims, France. That's where we were stationed. I finished out the war there at Rheims. And so we rented a car. We went around and visited the graves of some of my buddies. Anyway, after visiting these beautiful cemeteries over there, seeing the crosses on the graves of my buddies, knowing that we had been on the same missions, and here they were over in Europe. Some of them had been transported to the states but the crosses are still there. The military has left all the crosses in the cemeteries. It's at a time like that you reflect and on your own self, was I fortunate—why am I still here today and my buddies never got home. They earned the same medals we did and that's why it's hard for me bring up all the decorations and all but being in the transport unit like we were \_\_\_?\_\_\_ many medals the way the boys did in the big bombers, medium bombers, the fighters. They were in many more engagements than we were. I only ended up with two air medals, distinguished flying cross and the European ribbon with three battle stars. I cherish them very, very much, but I never think of them for myself, I always think back on these other fellows that are still over there.

**NELSON:** How did you get along with the men with whom you had the greatest contact?

**MILLER:** I never saw any problem any time. Times were so different way back then in the war, everybody worked together. Everybody followed his orders. He was expected to accomplish his orders and there was never a question asked. It's so different from today.

**NELSON:** Were there things you would do differently if you could do them again?

**MILLER:** During the wartime, no. I did exactly what I wanted to do. I thought it was the right thing.

**NELSON:** What was the most difficult thing you had to do during your period of material service?

**MILLER:** I think it was when we brought some supplies into Germany on this one particular trip and we were right by a concentration camp. We went in there to pick up a plane load and bring them back to a hospital over in Paris. We were waiting and waiting. I got on one of the trucks and went over there, my co-pilot and I so we got to see the entire camp. We saw the ovens. We saw hundreds and hundreds of bodies laying like cord wood. We saw these people that we were going to take back to the hospital. People that were half starved to death and in bad need of medicine and help. It was real depressing but I'll tell you, to see the smiles on those people and get hugs from them and me telling them that in a couple or three hours they were going to be back in a hospital, it was a great deal of gratitude.

**NELSON:** How did you learn about VE Day and what was your reaction to it?

**MILLER:** VE day was—we were expecting it but, to me, it came as a surprise. I was on a flight from Rheims, France, up to Holland. I went up there to pick up a plane load of hospital beds to bring back down into France. It was a long flight and it took a long time to get all of these beds together and get them in the plane and get them tied down and all. By the time that we were ready for takeoff it was almost dark. We had

heard about it then when we were on the ground up in Holland. But on my flight from Holland back down to Rheims, France, was one of my closest calls during my time over in the service. I came back and I had twenty-one holes in the airplane. It was a beautiful sight to behold from the sky flying at night time. Where ever you looked they were firing their guns and a lot of tracer bullets, only a lot of those tracers were coming right up at us and there was no way to get away from it. We just kept on flying. But, like I said, we were lucky that day to get back home with twenty-one holes in our airplane. It was all small arms so just didn't hit the right spot.

**NELSON:** How did you learn about VJ Day and what was your reaction to it?

**MILLER:** After the war had ended over in Europe, I flew my plane back home here and I was given a thirty day leave before I was to report to California for overseas assignment on the Pacific. Pick up a new plane in California. It was during those thirty days I was home waiting that the two atomic bombs were dropped and VJ Day was declared. There was a lot of whooping and hollering going on that day, I know. We got it all on the radio, but I had to drive down town to see what was going on. It was really exciting.

**NELSON:** What was your opinion of the use of the atomic bomb when it was used against Japanese civilians in August of 1945?

**MILLER:** I fully endorsed that decision. It must have been a tough one for President Truman. There were many lives lost but many, many lives were saved. Many times more lives would have been lost if we had not dropped that bomb and we had fought Japan in a conventional way having to have invade Japan with ground troops and also there were a few Japanese that had to sacrifice their lives in order for maybe millions of Americans.

**NELSON:** Has your opinion changed over the last fifty years?

**MILLER:** Not a bit.

**NELSON:** When and where were you officially discharged from the service?

**MILLER:** Let's see, I was actually discharged in Santa Ana, California, where I was waiting for my assignment to go to the Pacific. The war ended and I was discharged at the time out there but at the very same moment, I enlisted in the reserve. I stayed with the reserve for—I served 34 years total in the reserve.

**NELSON:** Did you have a disability rating or pension?

**MILLER:** No.

**NELSON:** Do you have any opinions or feelings about the nation's military status or its policies?

**MILLER:** I think we're going the right route with our military but it is a little unfair right now that we are the one and only—we're the number one military in the world now that Russia is bowing out so a great deal of responsibility is left on our shoulders. I'm just afraid if we're going to be used as a police action from here on out that there's going to be a lot, a lot of men that are going to have to be used up in many actions which really have no direct relations with the United States if we're going to be a police force for the whole world. That I don't like. If anybody threatens us in any way, I'll be behind it 100%. But as a policeman, I don't quite go along with that yet.

**NELSON:** Do you have any contact with the Veterans' Administration?

**MILLER:** Yes, I do. They've been very good to me. I go into Great Lakes to the VA Administration there and pick up medicine for my wife. We have to get that for her. The VA right in town here has got a fine installation on Parkview Avenue and they take care of me. I'm out there every month, it seems for one thing or another and I do get my medication from them.

**NELSON:** Would you like to tell us about your family support of you during your military life.

**MILLER:** My wife actually supported me when I was in the service. She made more money than I did

**NELSON:** How about moral support.

**MILLER:** Oh, moral support. Oh, wonderful. I had a very understanding wife and mother and father who were behind me on everything all the time. They didn't like to see me go but they knew it was a thing that had to be done. So they kept me in their prayers and backed me 100%

**NELSON:** Over subsequent years, what has this support meant to you?

**MILLER:** I'm just one of the lucky ones that has the love of a family, a caring family and a praying family, one who really knows the importance of family which we seem to be forgetting here in the country lately, the family support unit.

**NELSON:** Okay. Thank you.