

THE LAST LETTER HOME

THE LIFE AND DEATH OF ROBERT L. MILLER, S/SGT

Gary Graves

This three-ring notebook is about the life and death of S/Sgt Robert Lee Miller who was killed during a mission over Germany September 29, 1944 at the age 20. On that day S/Sgt Miller became a statistic. According to Google: during World War II, 51% of aircrews were killed on operations, 12% were killed or wounded in operational accidents and 13% became prisoners of war and only 24% survived the war unscathed. Personally, I didn't have the privilege knowing S/Sgt Miller. But there were times during my research of S/Sgt Miller and his family history I felt I was standing by his side during trouble times.

On this particular day (Feb 8, 2022) a Pike County resident by the name of Stan Maag came by the Pike County Archives and History Society, located in Murfreesboro, Arkansas carrying a box. After the formal greetings of each other the conversation led to the contents of the box. Mr. Maag explained that the contents of the box were personal effects of one S/Sgt Robert Lee Miller who was killed in Germany during World War II. I asked if the person in question was a relative of his? He said no, and the conversation led to how he came in possession of the articles in the box. Mr. Maag explained he had acquired the items from another person who came by them in an auction of a storage unit about 12 years ago. On one occasion Stan tried to find the relatives with no success. As I open the box the first items that caught my eye were the two medals, the Purple Heart Medal and the Army Air Force Air Medal. Some of the other items in the box were pictures of his unit, back home pictures of the family, obituaries of his death, letters from the War Department addressed to his mother Thelma Martin Miller, personal letters to his mom, a small New Testament, his high school annual, a Telegram notifying his mother, that her son Robert was missing in action, gold Bulova watch and etc....

As I started researching the family and reading the letters to his mom she had kept. I could almost feel the emotions Thelma must have gone through when she received the Western Union Telegram, that her son was missing in action. I even slipped the watch on my left wrist and I picture myself in a bomb out building that was used as a barracks preparing for a mission, not knowing if it was going to be my last. My thoughts were when Robert wore the watch for the last time 75+ years ago, and what S/Sgt Miller was thinking preparing for the upcoming mission, if it would be his last. Were Robert's thoughts about his family back home, his mission over Germany, or just getting back alive? Then the routine of checking one's pockets for any type of identifications and pictures of family. The removal of his watch and placing the items in a drawer for safe keeping.

This is his story. S/Sgt Robert Lee Miller, Army Serial Number 18163422, lost his life over Bitburg, Germany during World War II. He was one of three crew members on a Douglas A-20G "Havoc" Light Bomber and their plane was one of 36 on the mission that day. The 416th Bombardment Group target that day (September 29, 1944) were the warehouses at Bitburg, Germany and the weather conditions over the target were scattered clouds at 3,000 ft with a visibility of 8-10 miles. Their A-20G aircraft took-off at 0746 in Melun/Villaroche, France and their time over target was 0928. During the mission their aircraft (43-21759) received a direct hit on their second run over the target area, exploded and broke in half. One parachute was observed leaving and clearing the ship at 10,000 feet. The crew members are as follows: 1st Lt Arthur W.

Nordstrom, Pilot, S/Sgt Joseph D. Gossett Airplane Armorer-Gunner, and S/Sgt Robert L. Miller Airplane Mechanic-Gunner. At the time it was thought that the one parachute belonged to Lt Nordstrom but was later discovered belonging to S/Sgt Gossett. All three were listed as MIA (Missing in Action). It was later resolved that Lt. Nordstrom and S/Sgt Miller were KIA (Killed in Action) and S/Sgt Gossett became a POW (Prisoner of War). But this story is not about Lt. Nordstrom or S/Sgt Gossett, it's about S/Sgt Robert L. Miller whose remains were later recovered from an isolated grave, later documentation refers to the grave as a common grave, in the Cemetery at Grewenich, Germany at the time of disinterment. The identity was established by a laundry mark on S/Sgt Miller's underclothing (Miller 3422) along with a 50cal. machine gun that matched the serial number from their A-20G light bomber. Both Lt. Nordstrom and S/Sgt Miller were buried together.

ROBERT LEE MILLER was born on Jan 26, 1924 in Muskogee, OK to Neihmer Jackson "Jack" Miller, age 22, born Apr 11, 1901 and died Oct 14, 1977 and Thelma Martin, age 18, born 1906 and died 1983. Robert Lee Miller was Jack and Thelma's only child. Neihmer and Thelma were married Feb 16, 1923. Robert's draft registration card, dated Jun 29, 1942, has his description as 6' 1", weight 156lbs with brown eyes, black hair with light complexion. Their place of residence was 511 Kankakee, Muskogee, OK. Robert, also known as Bob, graduated from Central High School midterm and received his diploma after entering the Army. When Robert filled out his Draft registration card, dated Jun 29, 1942, he was an employee at Teel Laundry located in Muskogee, OK. He was 18 at that time. According to the newspaper Robert received his training at Sheppard Field, Texas, Gulfport, Mississippi, Las Vegas, NV., and Laurel Field, Mississippi and left for overseas duty in January 1944, serving as an engineer-gunner on A-20 light Bombers.

Robert's Paternal GRANDPARENTS (Biological): THOMAS ALBERT MILLER's (B: Jun 28, 1862, Forsith, GA – D: Apr 18, 1915, Texarkana, TX) parents were Thomas Jefferson Miller and Elizabeth "Betsy" Paul. Thomas Albert Miller married MARY ADDA LEE MCCURRY "Addie" (B: Feb 7, 1870, Quitman, TX – D: Mar 15, 1911, Muskogee, OK) on Jun 17, 1888. She was the daughter of William Jackson McCurry and Caroline J. Screws. Thomas Albert Miller had a 2nd wife Tinny George married on Dec 10, 1911.

Children:

1. Pealey Caroline Miller – B: Jul 2, 1889, Muskogee, OK, D: Jan 7, 1897, Muskogee, OK: Died at the age of 7
2. Joseph Riddle Miller – B: Aug 13, 1891, Muskogee, OK, D: Dec 26, 1918, Muskogee, OK: Married Nancy May Hall on Mar 8, 1913
3. Elinora May Miller – B: Aug 10, 1893, Muskogee, OK, D: 1920: Married Fred J Thomas Oct 29, 1913
4. Gladys Miller – B: Mar 2, 1897, Muskogee, OK, D: 1918: Spouse unknown
5. Thomas Milton Miller – B: Jul 24, 1898, Muskogee, OK, D: May 20, 1967, Tulsa, OK: Twin to Henry Richard
6. Henry Richard Miller – B: Jul 24, 1898, Muskogee, OK, D: Dec 1, 1994, Midwest, OK: Married Jessie Dawn Tippertt Fields Jul 24, 1917
7. Neihmer Jackson Miller – B: Apr 11, 1901, Muskogee, OK, D: Oct 14, 1977, Claremore, OK: Married Thelma Martin Feb 16, 1923, married 2nd spouse Myrtle L. Ford May 1932, and married the 3rd spouse Lillie Ree Whittenberg on Oct 19, 1934
8. Nancy Sylvia Miller – B: Aug 4, 1903, Muskogee, OK, D: Jun 8, 1993: married Julius H. Tillery
9. Emma Virginia Miller – B: May 3, 1908, Muskogee, OK, D: Dec 22, 1927: spouse unknown
10. Jessie Irene Miller – B: Jun 24, 1908, Muskogee, OK, D: Nov 14, 1970, Los Angeles, CA

Robert's Maternal GRANDPARENTS (Biological): LEE M. MARTIN B: Jun 11, 1878, D: 1946, Muskogee, OK. Parents unknown married NORA ROLLER (B: Jul 3, 1887, Seligman, MO, D: Mar 1963, Muskogee, OK) on Feb 10, 1901, Carthage, Missouri.

Children:

1. Thelma Martin – B: 1905/1906, MO, D: 1983: Married Neihmer Jackson Miller Feb 16, 1923, married 2nd Spouse Hurley J. Barnett B: Jul 22, 1903, Clarksville, AR, D: Mar 8, 1968, Orange, TX
2. Clarence Martin – B: Aug 10, 1910, Monett, MO, D: Mar 7, 1996: Married Mable Irene Martin
3. Alvin Leon Martin – B: Jun 16, 1913, Monett, MO, D: Aug 6, 1968, Elk City, OK: Married Deloris Y. Robertson Mar 16, 1941, Muskogee, OK
4. Lewis Edward Martin – B: Jan 27, 1917, Monett, MO, D: Oct 12, 1994: Married Martha Aubrey Dec 14, 1945

Robert's Biological FATHER: NEIHMER JACKSON "JACK" MILLER (B: Apr 11, 1901, D: Oct 14, 1977) - Buried at Woodlawn Cemetery, Claremore, Rogers County, Oklahoma next to his third wife Lillie Ree (Whitternberg) Miller (B: Sep 7, 1911, D: Sep 26, 1996). Neihmer and Lillie Ree married Oct 19, 1934.

Robert's Biological MOTHER: THELMA MARTIN (B: 1905/1906, D: 1983) - Is the 1st wife to Neihmer Jackson Miller and she is buried at Forest Lawn Memorial Park, West Orange, Orange County, Texas next to her second husband Hurley J. Barnett. Mr. Barnett would be Robert's step-father who he was living with, according to the 1940 census. The 1930 census has Robert living with his grandparents Lee and Nora Martin. The 1930 census does not list Thelma living with her parents; however, the 1910 census has Thelma's age 4, and the 1920 census has her age 14 living with Lee and Nora Martin with 3 brothers. Muskogee, OK; Clarence C. Martin age 9, Alvin Leon Martin age 6, and Lewis Martin.

Robert's STEPFATHER: HURLEY JAMES "H. J." BARNET (B: Jul 22, 1903, D: Mar 8, 1968) - He is the stepfather to Robert Lee Miller. Thelma (Martin) Miller was Hurley's first wife and she is buried next to him in Forest lawn Memorial Park, West Orange, Orange County, Texas. Could not find a marriage record. Records (city Directories) show that Thelma and H. J. living in Muskogee, OK. in 1934 and 1938. One city Directory has Hurley Barnett and Thelma living Orange, TX in 1948. The 1940 Census has Hurley and Thelma living in Muskogee, OK with one stepson Robert L. Miller. Hurley James Barnet was referred to "Barney" by his co-workers and apparently, he was in management for DuPont helping with planning and scheduling.

Around 1930, when Robert was about 6 years old, Neihmer and Thelma separated. As mentioned above, Thelma later married Hurley James Barnett. Thelma and Hurley raised Robert, but Thelma had no other children.

Neihmer Married twice more and had three more children, half-siblings to Robert.

Neihmer married his 2nd wife, Myrtle L. (Ford) around May 17, 1932, possibly at Wagoner, OK. They had 1 daughter, Mildred Ruth Miller (Jan 8, 1933-? - half-sister to Robert Lee Miller) and were separated and/or divorced likely between 1933 and 1934. Mildred married James Gillenwaters (Apr 3, 1928- Mar 1, 2017) on Mar 17, 1951 in Harris County, TX and they had 3 children: James Roy Gillenwaters (wife Karen), Janet Ruth Gillenwaters (husband Dwight Steffler) and Jeff David Gillenwaters (wife Debbie).

Neihmer married his 3rd wife, Lillie Ree (Whittenberg) Miller (Sep 7, 1911 – Sep 26, 1996) on Oct 19, 1934 at Muskogee, OK, they are buried next to each other at Woodlawn Cemetery, Claremore, OK. Neihmer and Lillie had 2 sons, Jack Milton Miller (Oct 24, 1936 – Sep 27, 2017 and Harvey Gene Miller (Dec 2, 1938 – 2017).

Jack Milton Miller (half-brother to Robert Lee Miller) had 2 known wives, 1 step-son, 2 daughters and 1 son.

Jack Milton and wife Beverly (Duke) Miller were married Jul 3, 1957 at Claremore, OK and had daughter Penny Renee Miller (Jul 8, 1963 – Jan 18, 2020). Penny married Robert Scott, II on Sep 12, 1987 at Tulsa, OK and they had 2 sons, Robert Scott, III (wife Sierra) and Ryan Scott.

Jack Milton Married Nona Mae (McKay) Miller (Sep 21, 1942 – Aug 19, 2021). Nona had previously been married to Derald Lavon McCabe and had Son Stacy Kyle McCabe (Apr 28, 1962 – died between Jan 18, 2020 & Aug 2021 Jack Milton Miller's step-son). Jack and Nona had a daughter Elizabeth J. Miller (husband Roger Gautier) and son Jack W. Miller.

Harvey Gene Miller (half-brother to Robert Lee Miller) married Bobbie Lea Thornton (abt 1943-?) on Feb 17, 1972 at Tulsa, OK. They had no known children.

WESTERN UNION DATED OCT 20, 1944 7:12AM READS;

THE SECRETARY OF WAR DESIRES ME TO EXPRESS HIS DEEP REGRET THAT YOUR SON STAFF SERGEANT ROBERT L MILLER HAS BEEN REPORTED MISSING IN ACTION SINCE TWENTY NINE SEPTEMBER OVER GERMANY IF FURTHER DETAILS OR OTHER INFORMATION ARE RECEIVED YOU WILL BE PROMPTLY NITIFIED. SIGNED: THE ADJUTANT GENERAL

S/SGT MILLER'S LAST LETTER HOME

(The below letter is an attempt to transcribe Robert's handwriting)

*Somewhere in France
Oct [sic - Sep] 28, 1944*

Dear Mother

Hope this finds you and Hurley ok. Im still kicking around, but I dont have much to say except I want same request sent to me.

Please send me a jar of Jam, and some canned stuff that wont spoil on the way over.

I am sending you some german propaganda sheets. They are fun to read. I sent Thelma some to, and a german paper.

I havent received and [sic - any] mail in sometime. There may be some today. We dont know yet.

I see where we have envaded [sic - invaded] again. That sounds good to us.

Well, ma I guess this is about all I can say. Let me know whats new. Ill write all I can.

*Love
Bob*

By reviewing all the letters that his mother kept this could have been his last letter home. While his handwritten date shows "Oct 28, 1944" this letter was most likely misdated by S/Sgt Miller and was probably written "Sep 28, 1944" since Robert was KIA on Sep 29, 1944, however we will never know for sure.

TIME LINE OF EVENTS

- 1910 Census: Thelma Martin age 4 living with parents Lee and Nora Martin Monett, Barry, MO
- 1920 Census: Thelma Martin age 14 living with her parents Lee and Nora Martin Muskogee, OK
- Feb 16, 1923: Marriage of Thelma Martin and Neihmer Jackson "Jack" Miller
- Jan 25, 1924: Birth of Robert Lee Miller, Muskogee, OK, to Thelma and Neihmer
- 1930 Census: Robert Miller age 6 living with mother's parents (grandparents) Muskogee, OK. Has three uncles living in household; Clarence age 19, Leon age 16 and Lewis's age 13
- Around May 17, 1932: Neihmer married his 2nd wife Myrtle L. (Ford) Miller (abt 1912-?) possibly at Wagoner, OK
- Oct 19, 1934: Marriage of Neihmer to 3rd wife Lillie Ree Whittenberg, place of marriage Muskogee, OK
- 1940 Census: Robert Miller age 16 living with his step dad Hurley J. Barnett and mother Thelma in Muskogee, OK
- Jun 29, 1942: Robert filled out his Draft Registration Card Muskogee, OK
- Dec 15, 1942: Robert Enlisted in the Army Air Force
- Jan 1, 1943: Robert Lee Miller filled out life insurance for \$10,000 with the National Service Life Insurance
- Jan 19, 1943: Robert left High school at midterm (Central High School) Muskogee, OK
- Between Jan 1943 and Jan 1944 Robert Lee Miller received training as a mechanic/gunner on the A-20 Light Bomber at Sheppard Field, TX, Gulfport, MS, Las Vegas, NV., and joined the 670th Bomb Squadron (L), 416th Bomb Group (L) between Oct 31 and Dec 27, 1943 at Laurel Field AAF, Laurel, MS. The 416th departed the United States on the beginning of January 1944 arriving at Station AAF-170, Wethersfield, England on Feb 1, 1944
- Aug 16, 1944: *Somewhere in England*, Wrote a letter to mom saying that his pilot recommended him for a medal and also made the statement he hasn't received his cigarettes. Also made a statement he had been having stomach problems
- Sep 2, 1944: *Somewhere in England*, Letter to his mom. Having trouble with his teeth. The Doctor said he had trench mouth probably caught it from one of the local pubs. He also says he had received his cigarettes
- Sep 7, 1944: Letter to his mom telling her he has received the cigarettes
- Sep 28, 1944: *Somewhere in France*, There is a question about this letter. S/Sgt Miller dated the letter to his mom Oct 28, 1944 but ***S/Sgt Miller was killed on Sep 29, 1944 so the actual letter date is most likely Sep 28, 1944, not Oct. This is probably his LAST LETTER HOME***
- ***Sep 29, 1944 FRIDAY: 416TH BOMB GROUP (L) MISSION # 148 OVER BITBURG, GERMANY.*** This is the mission S/Sgt Robert L. Miller was killed

THE FOLLOWING DESCRIBES EVENTS ASSOCIATED, OR CORRESPONDED WITH S/SGT ROBERT MILLER'S BIOLOGICAL MOTHER THELMA UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED

- **Oct 9, 1944: Received letter from Major General Samuel Anderson that your son is missing in action from the operation on 29 Sept. 1944**
- **Oct 20, 1944: Received Western Union Telegram from War Department (MIA)**
- Oct 25, 1944: Living in Muskogee, OK - Received a letter from the Adjutant General that it is confirmed her son is MIA (Missing in Action)
- Nov 16, 1944: Living in Muskogee, OK - Letter from HQ Army Air Force (MIA) indicating her son was on a mission over Bitburg, Germany
- Dec 2, 1944: Living in Pryor, OK - Letter from the Headquarters Army Air Forces, Washington that she has changed her address
- Dec 21, 1944: Letter from Headquarters Army Air Force, Washington tells her due to security it necessary to withhold names of the air crew
- Jan 9, 1945: Pryor, OK - Letter from HQ concerning handling of account
- Jan 12, 1945: Letter from Bertha A. Gossett whose son, S/Sgt Joseph Dervin Gossett, was a member of the crew that survived and was a POW
- Jan 20, 1945: Pryor, OK - Letter from Office of Settlement Accounts acknowledging a letter regarding the War Bonds purchase by her son
- Feb 10, 1945: Pryor, OK - Letter from Adjutant General, War Department regretting that no further report has been forwarded to the war department
- Apr 14, 1945: Pryor, OK - Letter from Army Effects Bureau that they have received some personal effects belonging to her son
- May 8, 1945: End of World War II in Europe
- May 12, 1945: Pryor, OK - Letter from Adjutant General, War Department explaining informing her that is no report of any changes of the status of her son
- Sep 5, 1945: Pryor, OK - Letter from the Office of Special Settlement Accounts
- Sep 30, 1945: Pryor, OK - Letter from Adjutant General, War Department on the long period of uncertainty concerning his status
- Oct 12, 1945: Pryor, OK - Received a letter that a Purple Heart has been awarded posthumously to her son from the Secretary of War
- Oct 19, 1945: Living Pryor, OK - Letter from the Veterans Administration explaining laws provide for the payment of pension to dependent mother or father of a veteran who dies as a result of a disease/injury incurred in service in line of duty
- Oct 22, 1945: Pryor, OK - Letter from Veterans Administration telling her she was named beneficiary for \$10,000 of the National Service Life Insurance
- Nov 5, 1945: Card from General Accounting Office that her claim has been currently received by the office
- Nov 9, 1945: Living in Pryor, OK - Letter from Laurel Army Air Field inquiring about S/Sgt Miller will
- Nov 13, 1945: Pryor, OK - Letter from Adjutant General, War Department explaining S/Sgt Miller has been awarded, by direction of the President the Air Medal and two Silver Oak-leaf Clusters, representing ten additional awards
- Jun 12, 1946: Pryor, OK - Letter from General Accounting Office for payment due her for S/Sgt pay and furlough allowance to the amount of \$1,300.95
- Sep 30, 1946: Orange, TX - Card from the Veterans Administration acknowledging her change of address to Orange, TX

- Nov 27, 1946: Reburial of S/Sgt Miller, previously as unknown X-445, at the U.S. Cemetery in Luxemburg
- Jan 20, 1947: Pryor, OK - Letter from the Adjutant General, Washington regrettfully informed her that a Finding of Death has been made of her son
- Feb 17, 1947: Pryor, OK - Letter from Records Administration Office that a Purple Heart Certificate and Presidential Accolade was sent to her
- Jul 14, 1947: Living Orange, TX - Card from the Veterans Administration notifying her of a Transfer of Records to Dallas, TX
- Feb 26, 1948: Living Orange, TX - An official report of burial discloses the remains of a deceased military person
- Apr 23, 1948: Pryor, OK - Letter from General Account Office stating that she has been appointed the administrator of the estate
- May 8, 1948: Living Pryor, OK - Letter for General Accounting Office, Washington, concerning her appointment as administrator
- Aug 6, 1949: Living Pryor, OK - Neihmer J. Miller application for Headstone or Marker, signed by Neihmer J. Miller, Robert's biological father. Buried at Woodlawn Cemetery Claremore, OK
- Mar 8, 1968: Hurley James Barnett S/Sgt Miller's stepfather died of Myocardial Infarction Orange, TX
- Oct 14, 1977: Neihmer Jackson "Jack" Miller: S/Sgt Miller's biological father died. Buried at Woodlawn Cemetery Claremore, OK
- 1983: Thelma Miller Barnett, S/Sgt Miller's biological mother died Orange County, TX and buried next to her 2nd husband Hurley Barnett in Forest Lawn Memorial Park
- Sep 26, 1996: Death of stepmother Lillie Ree (Whittenberg) Miller next to husband Neihmer H. Miller at the Woodlawn Cemetery, Claremore, OK

With so many documents it is very difficult to establish an exact date when and how his remains were disinterred. We do know his death was on Sep 29, 1944. Reading through the documents there must have been a disagreement between his biological mother (Thelma Martin) and his biological father (Neihmer Jackson Miller) who was the NEXT OF KIN.

We are warriors
 We must fight or we will die
 My uniform is bloodstained from the battles
 We fight as one
 We fight together as one
 Our uniforms are bloodstained from the battles
 We must fight or we will die
 We will fight for Freedom and Justice
 The sword is my weapon and God is my shield
 My spirit shall never yield
 We must fight or we will die
 My uniform is bloodstained from the battles
 I will not fail

Unknown author

Like to give the following 416th Bomb Group Archive members a big “shout out” for their assistance in researching S/Sgt Robert L. Miller’s background.

Tom Rickels whose uncle was a pilot with the 671st Bomb Squadron, MIA on Apr 10, 1944.

Rick Prucha whose dad was a pilot with the 668th Bomb Squadron and also manages the 416th Bomb Group Archive Website.

Wayne G. Sayles who is the Curator and Archivist of the 416th Bomb Group Archive located in Gainesville, MO.

Steven Roy whose father was an Airplane & Engine Mechanic with the 671st Bomb Squadron.

A big thanks:

Gary Graves