

Next To A Letter From Home: Glenn Miller and his Army Air Force Band in WWII

Glenn Miller Birthplace Museum- Clarinda, Iowa (2015)

“Entertainment is always a national asset. Invaluable in time of peace it is indispensable in wartime... All those who are working in the entertainment industry... are building and maintaining national morale both on the battlefield and on the home front.”- President Franklin D. Roosevelt- 12 June 1943

Glenn Miller, at the height of his popularity, gave up a lucrative recording and touring career to enlist in the United States Army during World War II. He felt an obligation to do all he could for the war effort, and that meant joining the service. Assigned to the Army Air Forces, Glenn modernized the band program, replacing the antiquated Sousa marches of WWI with jazzed up marches and brought popular music to the soldiers. The music of his Army Air Force Band boosted the morale of the troops. The Band's contributions to the war effort were recognized by all who heard them, from generals to the G.I. in the fox hole.

Supporting The War Effort

American joined the war in 1941, and as a civilian, Glenn Miller did what he could to support the troops. The Glenn Miller Orchestra supported the war effort through radio broadcasts, concerts, and the Sunset Serenade program, which ran from October 1941- May 1942.

Sunset Serenade was a morale booster and fundraiser for the troops. The two-hour show consisted of a live dance program, and a one-hour broadcast on NBC.

The radio broadcast featured a contest involving five army bases. Each base submitted their favorite Miller tune which was played during the broadcast. The listening public voted for which tune they thought should win. The winning base received a new RCA radio-phonograph player and 50 popular music records. Glenn paid for the weekly program out of his own pocket, costing him an estimated \$1,000 for each show.

However, Glenn felt the need to do more, and registered for the draft in 1942. Not content to wait (and knowing he was well over draft age), Glenn secretly applied for a commission with the U.S. Naval Reserve in June. He was rejected. Undeterred, he applied for a commission with the U.S. Army in August and was quickly accepted with orders to report on 7 October 1942 to the Army Air Forces.

In a press statement released in 1942, Glenn explained why he joined the service, writing, *“I, like every American, have an obligation to fulfil. That obligation is to lend as much support as I can to winning this war. It is not enough for me to sit back and buy bonds... I sincerely feel that I owe a debt of gratitude to my country.... the mere fact that I have had the privilege of exercising the rights to live and work as a free man puts me in the same position as every man in uniform, for it was the freedom and the democratic way of life we have that enabled me to make the strides in the right direction.”*

The orchestra played its last Chesterfield broadcast on 24 September, and its final performance two days later at the Central Theatre in Passaic, New Jersey.

In The Army Now

Captain Glenn Miller, U.S. Army Air Forces, saw himself as a band-builder, a modernizer of military music, and morale-booster. He organized many Army Air Force bands, each to be trained to play

marching music as well as dance-band music. He was reported to have organized 49 bands for service at Army Air Forces Technical Training Command stations throughout the U.S.

Glenn was determined to modernize military music. He wanted to take music beyond the antiquated Sousa marches of WWI and update them with swinging march arrangements of jazz tunes such as the St. Louis Blues March and marching versions of Blues in the Night and Jersey Bounce. The bands would also play modern Big Band tunes to give the soldiers, as Glenn wrote, “a hunk of home.”

Glenn debuted his modernized military band on 28 July 1943 at the Yale Bowl in New Haven, Connecticut. He had replaced the marching snare and base drummers with two percussionists with complete drum sets and two bass players to provide all the rhythm. He mounted this new rhythm section onto two specially converted jeeps that rolled along with the marching band! His jazzed-up marches had the crowd of 30,000 on its feet. However, not everyone was as pleased.

Not all officers agreed with the new approach to modern military music and Captain Miller received a lot of negative feedback from older career officers who wanted to stick with the Sousa tradition. The Commandant of Cadets at New Haven lodged a complaint with the post commander about Glenn’s new style of music after witnessing the band at the Bond Rally at the Yale Bowl. “Look Captain Miller” he reportedly said. “We played those Sousa marches straight in the last war and we did all right, didn’t we?” Glenn is reported to have replied “You certainly did, Major. But tell me one thing: Are you still flying the same planes you flew in the last war, too?”

In the spring of 1943, Captain Miller was transferred to New Jersey to be closer to several Army Air Forces (AAF) basic training stations. This gave him access to musicians from the New York City area that were entering the military. Major-Generals Walter Weaver and Barton Yount were big supporters of Captain Miller, and gave him carte-blanche to secure whomever he saw fit from the Army or the AAF. Glenn could pick the best musicians for his own band while using the others to form bands for other bases. With both classical and big band musicians at his disposal, Miller created a “super band” that was bigger, and some felt better, than his civilian band.

Supporting The War Effort

While stationed in the U.S., the band was utilized for recruiting and fundraising for the war effort. The band featured in a recruiting and public relations radio broadcast for the AAF called “I Sustain The Wings.” In addition, the band played concerts for War Bond rallies with the guests such as Bob Hope, Rita Hayworth, Jimmy Durante, Bing Crosby, and Dinah Shore. In between this work the band also played concerts for recruiting drives and at military hospitals.

An important part of the Band’s duties while still stationed in the U.S. was helping to raise funds for the war effort by playing concerts for War Bond drives. The Band played with guests such as Bob Hope, Rita Hayworth, Jimmy Durante, Bing Crosby, and Dinah Shore. The rally concerts were a great success and held in several cities including Garden City (NY), Indianapolis, Rochester (NY), St. Louis, and Chicago. The Band helped to raise more than \$10 million in War Bonds and Stamps.

Glenn’s AAF Band was a huge success for the Army Air Forces in recruiting and informing the public about this relatively new branch of the armed forces. The “I Sustain The Wings” broadcasts were created to inform public about the AAF and to help in recruiting men to this branch of the service. The 25 minute broadcast consisted of music by Glenn’s AAF intermixed with dramatized stories of life in the Army Air Forces. The show began on 29 May 1943 with a trial run broadcast just to New England. The show

proved popular and went national on 17 June. It proved successful enough that the band did two live sets each Saturday, one for the East Coast and a second set five hours later for the West Coast. The Band played the weekly broadcast until they left for England.

Transfer to the ETO

“We, the band, didn’t come here to set any fashions in music or to any new swing styles- we came here merely to bring a much-needed touch of home to some lads who have been here a couple of years. These lads are doing a hell of a job- they have been starved for real, live American music and they know and appreciate only the tunes that were popular before they left the States.” –Glenn Miller in a letter written to George Simon

Glenn requested a transfer to the European Theater of Operations (ETO). He felt the Band would have a greater impact playing overseas for the troops. The AAF, however, was reluctant to let the band go. They were already making a great impact with their War Bond concerts, and the “I Sustain the Wings” broadcasts. Glenn’s initial requests were denied until he gained a valuable ally in Colonel Edward M. Kirby. Colonel Kirby was a Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF) officer working with the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) to set up a new allied forces radio station. Colonel Kirby suggested the Band be transferred to England to take part in the broadcasts. SHAEF testified that Miller’s AAF Band was “vital to the war effort,” leaving little choice but to transfer the Band to the ETO. Glenn selected 62 men to make up his newly renamed American Band of the Allied Expeditionary Force. This included musicians, arrangers, producers, and instrument mechanics, in addition to Executive Officer (XO) Don Haynes and Glenn himself. The Band (except Captain Miller and Sergeant Paul Dudley who had traveled ahead) boarded troop transport NY8245 (a.k.a. the Queen Elizabeth) on 21 June 1944, headed for Great Britain.

Allied Expeditionary Forces Program (AEFP)

General Dwight Eisenhower, Supreme Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force (AEF), wanted a special radio service for the Allied Forces under his command. The new radio service would be a vital way of maintaining troop morale, creating a sense of unity among the force’s various nationalities, and providing an outlet for General Eisenhower to pass on instructions if needed. The broadcasts would provide troops with news, information, and entertainment. To insure each nation would have their own programming, the broadcast proportions were split based upon the proportions of the three main armies in the AEF, 50% US, 35% British, 15% Canadian. Captain Miller’s band was selected to represent the U.S. portion of programming. The Band’s primary duty was to perform regular broadcasts on the AEFP. They were assigned a heavy schedule of broadcasting, performing ten programs (or 3 hours, 15 minutes) a week.

Glenn knew the heavy broadcast schedule would cause the full orchestra to run out of new material and force it into repeats. To prevent this, he developed smaller units from the main orchestra to cover different parts of the broadcast schedule. This Miller innovation kept repetition to a minimum and provided great variety in the broadcast.

Glenn developed four “versions” of his AAF Band that played on the Allied Expeditionary Forces Program broadcasts. The Full Orchestra included the entire band and was directed by Glenn Miller- (40 members)

The American Dance Band was directed by Ray McKinley and consisted of the brass, sax, and rhythm sections. Their program, *“The Swing Shift,”* featured big band swing music, and signing by Johnny Desmond, Ray McKinley, and The Crew Chiefs.

The Swing Sextet was a small jazz band led by Mel Powell. Their program featured improvised solos with opening and closing ensemble choruses, along with songs by Johnny Desmond and The Crew Chiefs.

Strings With Wings was conducted by George Ockner and consisted of the string section. Their program featured light classical and popular mood music.

Johnny Desmond backed by the AAF Band. The program, variously called "*Sergeant Johnny Sings*," "*A Soldier And A Song*," and "*Sergeant Johnny Desmond*" and featured songs by Desmond, and an instrumental by the full Band.

Glenn knew what he wanted from his band and for the broadcasts he was assigned. Initial meetings with the BBC were tense until they (the BBC) realized that it was better to let Glenn proceed as he had planned. Franklin Engleman, a BBC announcer during the war, recalled, "He was quite a surprise to us in the AEF Programme... a popular bandleader who looked anything but. Tall, lean, sardonic-looking in his rimless glasses, he was more like a university professor in a Captain's uniform. But he talked like a hard-boiled showman. He knew to a fraction what went to make up his success. He knew what made him tick. His ideas were cut and dried before he set foot in England. It took us some time to realize that... I told Glenn we could let him have the top British stars to broadcast with his Band- and were some time finding out that he didn't want them. He had a complete entertainment unit and a set of formats for all his shows. What he really wanted was to be given studios, technicians and air time and left to get on with it. In fact, he was pretty sarcastic about some of our attempts to be useful."

A Hectic Schedule

The Band kept up a hectic schedule in between broadcasts, with little time off. They performed live concerts for the troops in between their regular radio broadcasts. They travelled all over England performing at airbases, hospitals, and concert halls, many times playing two or three venues in one day. Their first concert, held on 14 July 1944 at Thurleigh USAAF base, was a huge success and was just the morale building effort that Glenn had wanted to provide. Sgt. Paul Dudley recalls that first concert and what it meant to both the troops and to Glenn, "... the American Band of the AEF mounted a makeshift stage inside a giant steel hangar. 3500 men of the Eighth Air Force sat on the dirt floor, on the wings of planes and on the lofty beams overhead. As the opening theme "Moonlight Serenade" pumped the psychological life blood of American music back in to those youthful, homesick hearts Captain Miller walked out on to the stage and an eerie yell of welcome swelled from the audience: a happy cry, yet filled with the weird wildness of a torrential spill of suddenly released frustrations. Colonel Kirby, whose efforts had transported the Band to the ETO, stood proudly listening at the far end of the hangar. After the show, Glenn walked straight to him to say, "Colonel, making all the money in the music business could never have made feel this rich."

The Band was greeted by enthusiastic crowds wherever it went. Glenn described his reaction to these crowds, writing, and "The most important sound that can possibly come out of such concerts- the sound of thousands of G.I.'s reacting with an ear-splitting, almost hysterical happy yell after each number."

Paris

Glenn wanted to bring the music of the AAF Band to the frontline troops, and pushed to take the band to Paris for a series of concerts. However, the BBC was reluctant to let them go because they wouldn't be able to complete their AEF broadcast schedule. A compromise was finally reached that allowed Major Miller (promoted in August 1944) to take the Band to Paris on the condition that six-weeks-worth

of AEF broadcasts were pre-recorded before they departed. The highlight of the six-week trip was to be a Christmas Day concert for the troops, broadcast live to England and America.

The Band needed to record thirty hours (six weeks) of programs in twenty days, while keeping to their regular broadcasting and concert schedules. This was a heavy load, and Glenn put it to a vote of the band members if they wanted to go. They all agreed and finished the recordings two days early. They had recorded eight weeks of programming (the required six weeks plus an additional two) while maintaining their regular broadcasting schedule, a total of 115 broadcast programs recorded in just eighteen days! It was now time to head to Paris.

15 December 1944

Glenn had changed the original orders calling for Don Haynes to fly to Paris ahead of the band. Instead, he would fly over first with the band following a few days later. However, bad weather had grounded all flights for several days. Anxious to get to Paris, Glenn accepted an offer to ride in a small Norseman UC-64A plane which was leaving on 15 December.

The poor weather continued on the 15th, but the pilot stated it was clearing over the Channel. Major Miller, Colonel Norman Baessel, and Flight Officer John Morgan departed at 1:45 p.m. from Twinwood Farm Airfield near Bedford.

The Band arrived in Paris on the 18th to find neither buses nor Major Miller waiting for them. An inquiry showed no record of Major Miller's flight arriving in Paris. Three days had passed before anyone knew that Major Miller had gone missing over the English Channel.

The Band Played On

The BBC was secretly informed of Glenn's disappearance. The shocking news was compounded by the fact that the Band's pre-recorded broadcasts still had Glenn's voice in them. The BBC would have to edit the recordings to remove his voice, and time it perfectly so that the edited broadcasts did not begin before news of Glenn's disappearance was officially released. First Lieutenant Haynes took over command of the Band, with Ray McKinley conducting. They played the Christmas Day Concert as planned. The Band continued concerts for the troops in France, and then in Germany after the end of hostilities.

The Band's service in the ETO came to an end on 11 August 1945 when they returned to America. They had kept up a hectic pace since first arriving in the ETO almost 14 months ago, playing 956 separate musical performances (an average of about three performances per day) to more than 1,250,000 troops.

The Band played their last concert on 13 November 1945 at the Annual Dinner of the National Press Club in Washington, D.C. Emcee, Eddie Cantor, introduced the Band, telling the audience, "As a civilian he led an orchestra that for three years was the number one band in America. Now Glenn Miller could have stayed here. He could have made himself a lot of money. But he chose not to. He was an extremely patriotic man, and felt an intense obligation to serve his country. So he disbanded his orchestra and formed an even greater one. He took himself and his orchestra overseas where he felt he could do the most good for our fighting men. And now this great band is back here this evening without its most important man, Miller himself. For, as we know, he made the supreme sacrifice for his country. But he will never be forgotten, for always we will have the sound of the great music he created."

President Harry Truman was the guest of honor at the concert, and led the standing ovation as the Band began to play. At the conclusion of the concert, they were informed that they were being discharged. General Henry H. "Hap" Arnold, Commanding General of the Army Air Forces extended his thanks to the Band in a letter dated, 3 December 1945. In it he writes, "At the conclusion of our wartime AAF program and the inactivation of the 39th AAF BU (2nd RPU), the Glenn Miller Unit, and the AAF Military Band, I want to congratulate the officers and men for work well done. I have always regarded our Air Force radio broadcasts as a strictly military operation, whose objective of public understanding and support is just as vital as a mission in a theatre of war. It is with deep satisfaction that I write 'Mission Accomplished' in the log of the AAF wartime radio. Yours has been as vital as that of your teammates in the bombers, fighters, and transports. To those of you who served overseas, I want you to know that we at HQ AAF were most cognizant of the morale boost that you contributed to our fighting men. To those who served as faithfully in the zone of the interior, the result of your work served to keep troop and home-front morale high during World War II. Through your efforts and your talent you have kept the American public informed of our war in the air and inspired them to cooperate actively in this people's war. On behalf of the entire AAF, let me extend to each and every one of you my best wishes for the future."

"Next To A Letter From Home"

Glenn Miller's Army Air Force Band made a significant impact as modernizers of military music, musical innovators, and morale builders. Their music gave troops a brief distraction from the horrors of war, and a sense of normalcy, which proved to be a huge morale booster. Lt. General James "Jimmy" Doolittle, 8th Air Force Commander, once remarked to Glenn that, *"Next to a letter from home, Capt. Miller, your organization is the greatest morale booster in the ETO."*

Major Miller assembled what many consider to be one of the greatest big bands ever, featuring the top musicians available. The band set a new musical standard by successfully combining classical music and jazz. The full orchestra arrangements, combining "swing" music and strings to create an enjoyable jazz sound, set it apart from all others.

The legacy of Glenn Miller's Army Air Force Band continues in many ways. Their version of the St. Louis Blues March is still played by American military bands. The Airmen of Note, the premier jazz ensemble of the United States Air Force, was created in 1950 to continue the legacy of Glenn Miller's Army Air Force Band. The nineteen member ensemble continues the work that Glenn began in 1942. The Glenn Miller Orchestra and many other modern-day Big Bands continue to play the music of Glenn Miller's AAF Band. Most importantly, the veterans still remember the impact this great band had on their morale during the war. Sergeant Paul Dudley, perhaps, sums it up best: *"The sounds of war are better forgotten. The whine of the 88, the woosh of the flak, the death-belch of the burp-gun are all where they should be, quiet in the calm of approximate peace. But, silent among the faded noises of conflict, lies one sound which will be remembered with affection by the Yanks of the ETO. It was a warm sentimental sound that poured out of liberated radios behind the lines, spilled into youth-manned cockpits homing for the bomber and fighter bases; it was a sound that made apple-cheeked warriors feel closer to home. This was the music of Major Glenn Miller's American Band of the AEF."*

Addendum

What's In A Name?

While we now refer to the Band as Glenn Miller's Army Air Force Band that was never their official title. The Band went through many name changes during the war. Here are a few of the names of the Band:

418th Army Air Forces Technical Training Command Band (Inception - July 1943)

418th Army Air Forces Training Command Band (July 1943 - Spring 1944)

Army Air Forces Band (Special) (Spring 1944)

Band of the Army Air Forces Technical Training Command (May 1943- July 1944. "Technical" later dropped)

American Band of the Supreme Allied Command (July - August 1944)

American Band of the Allied Expeditionary Force (August 1944 - September 1945)

Major Glenn Miller's Army Air Force Overseas Orchestra (September 1945 - Disbanded)

Glenn Miller's Army Air Force Band (Postwar)