

1945 March 5-11

Thunderbolt Miller



Capt. Earl D. Miller, who is serving with the 12th Air Force, has been awarded the distinguished flying cross.

Miller Gets DFC For Leading Planes Wrecking Enemy Train

AT A 12TH AAF P-47 BASE IN ITALY —(Special)— Flying so low that smoke from the locomotive partially blocked his vision and debris from the exploding target threatened serious damage to his plane, Capt. Earl D. Miller of La Crosse, Wis., led a seven-plane mission of fighter-bombers in an attack that completely destroyed a large railroad train behind the enemy lines on the Italian front.

Capt. Miller has been awarded the distinguished flying cross.

He is a son of Mr. and Mrs. Carl Miller of 705 Pine street, La Crosse.

Official orders announcing the award of the distinguished flying cross, presented at an advanced air base by Brigadier General B. W. Chidlaw, commanding general of the 22nd Tactical Air Force, stated in part as follows:

"On Oct. 16, 1944, Lieut. Miller led a seven-plane flight of fighter-bombers in an attack upon enemy communication lines in Northern Italy. Sighting a large railroad train near Modena, Lieut. Miller immediately dived in attack. Guiding his P-47 in a precision run over the objective, he enabled them to score direct hits, destroying the train.

"Continuing in attack, the flight leader repeatedly strafed the freight yards at Carpi, destroying one locomotive and three motor trucks and damaging more than 10 freight cars."

Capt. Miller is a graduate of West Salem high school, West Salem, Wis. He also studied for 18 months at La Crosse State Teachers college before interrupting his education to join the armed forces on Dec. 15, 1939.

He was first stationed at Brooks Field, Texas, and received his training at bases in the southern states.

Capt. Miller received his wings Nov. 10, 1942, and three months later was sent overseas to begin active duty in the Tunisian campaign.

He is serving with a veteran 12th Air Force fighter squadron that is credited with thousands of combat, escort and reconnaissance missions over the Mediterranean theater. The outfit has participated in all of the major campaigns of that war zone and holds the war department distinguished unit citation for outstanding achievement.

Capt. Miller was promoted to his present rank last November.

In addition to the distinguished flying cross, he has been awarded the air medal and oak leaf clusters.

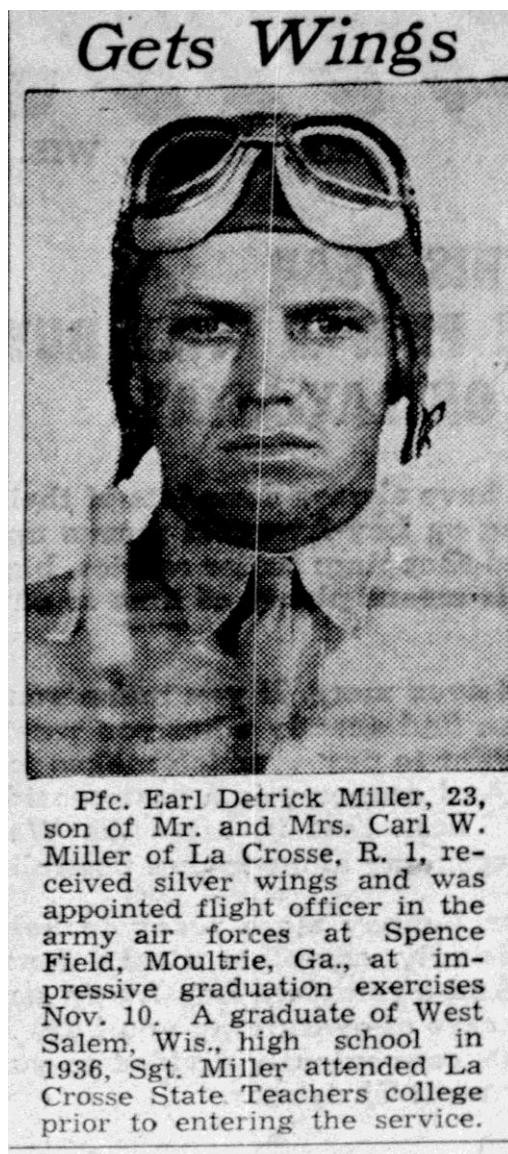
Two brothers of the pilot are serving with the U. S. navy: Ensign Harvey W. Miller and Raymond O. Miller, S1c.

La Crosse Tribune, 1945 March 11, page 5

Earl "Dutch" Miller was born in October 1918 on a farm near Barre Mills. As the oldest of seven children, he worked on his family's farm and also for other area farmers. Miller had a part-time job setting pins in a La Crosse bowling alley too. He graduated from West Salem High School in 1936.¹

Miller enrolled at the La Crosse State Normal School (now the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse), but his academic pursuits were derailed by an episode of scarlet fever.²

He enlisted in the Army in mid-December 1939. Miller became a mechanic in the Army Air Corps in Texas. Following a 13-month posting to Puerto Rico, he came back to the United States for pilot training. After earning his pilot's wings, Miller went overseas in February 1943 to North Africa.³



La Crosse Tribune, 1942 November 22, page 4

Miller flew fighter aircraft in support of American ground troops as they advanced through the Mediterranean Theater. First, he was in Tunisia and then part of the invasion of the island of Sicily. As the battlefield moved to Italy, Miller's unit followed providing air support. In less than eight months in 1944, Miller was promoted to second lieutenant, first lieutenant, and captain.⁴ He was a member of the 350th Fighter Group.⁵

Captain Earl Miller primarily flew the Republic P-47 Thunderbolt ("Jug"). It was just over 36 feet long and had a wingspan of almost 41 feet.⁶ The Thunderbolt had the distinction of being the heaviest one-seat, propeller-driven fighter plane ever built by the United States. When loaded, it weighed 14,500 pounds.⁷

Several models of the P-47 were built for the Army Air Corps, with the delivery of the P-47B in March 1942 being the first, that improved capabilities in each successive version. Depending on the version, the single engine put out 2,000 to 2,800 horsepower for a maximum speed of 430 miles per hour. It boasted eight .50-caliber machine guns on its wings. Some versions could carry a bomb load of 2,500 pounds. The P-47N mounted three 500-pound bombs and ten rockets. This armament made it a fearsome ground-attack aircraft. It had a range with a heavy bomb load of 475 miles, but with three drop tanks it could stay in the air for nine hours and fly 1,150 miles.⁸

More P-47 Thunderbolts were produced, 15,660, than any other fighter plane in American history.⁹



P-47D Thunderbolt

(The National Interest)

P-47Cs were introduced to the European Theater in January 1943 to escort heavy bombers and fly fighter patrols over the continent. But the P-47C did not have sufficient range to escort bombers all the way to their targets and back.¹⁰

The P-47D, which introduced the bubble canopy for better visibility, accounted for seventy-five percent of all Thunderbolts produced. It was a rugged aircraft with a lot of firepower and range.¹¹

In two years and one month of combat in the European Theater, Thunderbolts destroyed 6,300 enemy aircraft at the cost of 3,500 of their own. Thunderbolts also served in the Pacific Theater.¹²

Thunderbolts operated mostly as fighter-bombers with the 15th Air Force in Italy. Flying from a base about 30 miles behind the lines of the 5th Army, groups of four to eight Thunderbolts strafed and dive-

bombed German troops and vehicles, as well as railroad bridges and trains. Low-level missions exposed the planes to ground fire, and Miller's aircraft was hit several times. He even had to make a belly landing once because of damage to his aircraft.¹³



Flight of P-47Ds of the 345th Fighter Squadron during World War II

(MilitaryHistoryNow.com)

Earl Miller flew 186 combat missions and earned the Silver Star, two Distinguished Flying Crosses, and several air medals.¹⁴

Captains and Majors during the war who remained in the Army Air Corps after World War II reverted to First Lieutenants in the Regular Army after the war.¹⁵ Less than a year after World War II ended, Miller started his training as a jet fighter pilot, in the P-80 Shooting Star, at Williams Field in Arizona as a member of the 362nd fighter group.¹⁶ Miller was a member of the 20th fighter group at Shaw Field in South Carolina.¹⁷

When one of his buddies from the war went to Texas to visit his girlfriend, Miller tagged along. There he met one of the sisters of the girlfriend. Ruth "Gerry" Bagley and Earl Miller were married in 1947.¹⁸

Here are just a few of his assignments during his postwar career. In 1951, Major Miller was stationed at Tyndall Field in Florida.¹⁹ His next assignment was supervisor of pilot training at the Instrument Pilot School at Moody Air Force Base in Georgia starting late in 1952.²⁰ In early 1956, Miller became an operations officer for the newly-formed 19th Air Force at Foster Air Force Base in Texas.²¹

Miller flew 109 more combat fighter missions in the Korean War and the Vietnam War.²²

Lt. Colonel Earl Miller retired from the Air Force in 1969.²³

He and his wife bought a hobby farm at La Crescent, Minnesota. Miller was the commander of the La Crescent American Legion post, the Veterans of Foreign Wars post in Brownsville, and the La Crosse chapter of the Retired Officers Association. He flew Cessna planes from the La Crosse Airport until he was in his late 80's.²⁴

After his wife died in 2007, Miller moved to Eagle Crest in Onalaska. He died in April 2014 at the age of 95.²⁵

After a 30-year military career and service in three wars, we can say with certainty that Earl "Dutch" Miller was truly a hero living next door.

Jeff Rand

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Sources & Notes:

¹ Earl "Dutch" Miller obituary, *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 2014 April 13, page C6.

² *La Crosse Tribune*, 2014 April 13.

³ "Commanding Officer Sends This Chap Back To U.S. After 186 Missions, Five Plane Wrecks," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 April 8, page 4.

⁴ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 April 8.

⁵ "Two La Crosse Men In Fighter Group Cited For Duty in Italy," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1944 December 17, page 5. M. Sgt. Ralph J. Thimmesch was the other man.

⁶ Andrew W. Waters, *All the U.S. Air Force Airplanes, 1907-1983* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1983), 47.

⁷ Gene Gurney, *The War in the Air* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1962), 344.

⁸ Waters, *All the U.S. Air Force Airplanes*, 261-262

⁹ Waters, *All the U.S. Air Force Airplanes*, 261-262.

¹⁰ Waters, *All the U.S. Air Force Airplanes*, 261-262.

¹¹ Joshua Stoff, *The Thunder Factory: An Illustrated History of The Republic Aviation Corporation* (Osceola, Wisconsin: Motorbooks International, 1990), 45-47.

¹² Waters, *All the U.S. Air Force Airplanes*, 261-262.

¹³ "Commanding Officer Sends This Chap Back To U.S. After 186 Missions, Five Plane Wrecks," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 April 8, page 4.

¹⁴ *La Crosse Tribune*, 2014 April 13.

¹⁵ "La Crosse Area Men Nominated For Regular Army Commissions," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1947 May 31, page 1.

¹⁶ "Capt. Miller Attending Jet Fighter School," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1946 July 21, page 7.

¹⁷ "Miller Taking Part In Western Activity," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1946 November 18, page 2.

¹⁸ *La Crosse Tribune*, 2014 April 13.

¹⁹ "Flies From Florida," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1951 November 1, page 34.

²⁰ "Miller Named Supervisor At Pilot School," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1952 December 28, page 7.

²¹ "Local Officer Assigned To 19th Air Force," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1956 February 20, page 11.

²² *La Crosse Tribune*, 2014 April 13.

²³ *La Crosse Tribune*, 2014 April 13.

²⁴ *La Crosse Tribune*, 2014 April 13.

²⁵ *La Crosse Tribune*, 2014 April 13.

To see Thunderbolts in action:

How to Fly the P-47, Part 1 (1943 documentary) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FcGoc7P1MnA>

How to Fly the P-47, Part 2 (1943 documentary) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Y3v1-WMJS8>

362nd Fighter Group Over Germany https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y_dYBOgLbHc

Great Planes: Republic P-47 Thunderbolt <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WTRSDgwLL8I>

Restored Republic P-47 Thunderbolt flight demo <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=niZTHDtcUnc>

P-47 Thunderbolts at 2014 air show <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kP00A4owzjo>