

HORATIO (HORRIE) CLIVE MILLER

Career History



*Horrie Miller in cockpit of Fokker Universal VH-UJT
at Parafield 1931
Courtesy D Darian Smith Collection*

Horrie Miller was born at Creswick, Ballarat, Victoria on 30 April 1893 and died at Dalkeith, WA on 27 September 1980.

After growing up with dairy farmers in Gippsland (his mother died when he was an infant; and his father moved to WA), Miller moved to Melbourne after achieving a basic level of education. He was employed by Tarrant Motors, automotive retailers. However the employer also had some links with aviation, and it was here that Miller met some future aviation pioneers such as Harry Hawker, Harry Kauper and Harry Busted. Those three went to England in 1911, and Miller followed in 1913 after receiving an inheritance from his father.

The three “Harry’s” had found employment with either the Bristol or Sopwith aircraft companies. Miller, using these connections, also found

employment with Sopwith. Working long hours, Miller learnt about all aspects of aircraft construction. Miller was involved with The Tabloid biplane that Sopwith used to win the Schneider Seaplane Trophy in Monaco in April 1914. While still working at Sopwith Miller made plans to conduct his own flying training, but this was interrupted by the outbreak of WWI when all aviation came under government control. Enquiries about enlisting in the Royal Flying Corps received negative replies as Miller was told he was not considered officer material, as he was not from the educated class.

Instead, after hearing that Australia was forming her own Flying Corps, Miller returned home and enlisted in the Central Flying School. However he was told there would be some delay until the school was ready. Meanwhile Miller had drawn up plans to manufacture his own aircraft. While running a taxi business, the aircraft was built in rented premises around a French Gnome engine using parts from a smashed Bleriot. Under war regulations, all private aircraft had to be registered with the Defence Department. Miller informed the department of his endeavours by letter, and when it was finished he received a certificate dated 8 June 1916. Thus he became the owner of the first officially registered civil machine in Australia.

The aircraft was badly damaged during an indoor engine test, but was rebuilt and towed to Point Cook, one week before Miller was due to enlist. Miller actually test flew the aircraft himself, but at the same time realised his limitations as a pilot. After notification of an overseas enlistment, Miller put the aircraft aside and sold the engine. He embarked in October 1916, and was attached to 3 Squadron. Basic and advanced training was undertaken in the UK, and some brief operational sorties were flown in France before Miller became sick with the Spanish Flu. He was posted to South Africa for convalescence, and then returned to Australia. On recovery he was posted to Point Cook where he tested planes. He also flew from Richmond, NSW, while waiting to return to France. But the armistice intervened and all movements were cancelled. Remaining with

the AFC, Miller was involved in surveying, by road, an aviation route between Sydney and Melbourne. But in his own words, he was “too much of a lone wolf” for a long period of service life, and resigned in late 1919.

Seeing a future in post-war aviation, Miller had ordered a disposals machine from the UK: an Armstrong Whitworth FK.8. But with no sign of delivery, Miller took a job with a South Australian aviation company in the seaside suburb of Glenelg. This was a true “barnstorming” enterprise, run by ex-AFC men and engaged in providing joy flights and anything else that would provide a commercial return. During one such flight in a Sopwith Dove, Miller was involved in a landing mishap, although nobody was seriously injured. A DH-6 biplane was acquired from the AFC in early 1920. Soon Miller was flying to regional towns in the aircraft. Later in 1920 he did some “Peace Loan” flying with the defence department.



DH-6 C9372 “The Clutching Hand” at Waikerie in late 1920 with Darcy Rees, Horrie Miller’s partner (left), and a passenger (PD)

Finally Miller’s war surplus FK-8 arrived from England. It was assembled at Glenroy, in Victoria. With new business partners, he registered a venture known as The Commercial Aviation Company. The FK-8 was moved to Rochester where profitable barnstorming soon began. Unfortunately, during a severe thunderstorm in October the machine was badly damaged. Repairs were undertaken and much flying was accomplished during 1921 over much of eastern Australia. In early 1922 Miller’s partner wished to retire from the business to marry: the FK-8 was sold to Qantas.

Miller was briefly involved in a venture which intended to operate Curtiss Seagull seaplanes off Adelaide – but the project proved unviable. Miller’s next venture was to buy a Bristol fighter and fit it with a 340hp engine. Miller flew it from Richmond to Melbourne. Miller then reached a deal to sell the Bristol to Qantas – delivered to Longreach at the seller’s risk. This was duly accomplished. Meanwhile, Miller ordered a DH-9 from the UK with a 240hp Puma engine.

In the meantime he commenced flying in Brisbane, for an enterprise which operated an Avro 504k with a 100hp engine. Miller considered it dangerously underpowered and arranged for one of the 150hp engines from one of the Adelaide-based Curtiss flying boats to be installed. This proved so successful that Miller used it to obtain a win in the 1924 Aerial Derby held in Sydney (handicap section). The other Curtiss flying boat was used for a short time off Southport. Finally the DH-9 arrived in May 1925, and the Curtiss was sold. He re-joined the RAAF in August 1925, and unsuccessfully attempted to sell the service his new DH-9. Twelve months later he again embarked on a “barnstorming” career.

While considering an Adelaide-Broken Hill air service, some successful flying was held from the latter city in 1927. The money earned enabled Miller to return to Adelaide, where he operated under the name Commercial Aviation Company from a hangar at Albert Park. However, the DH-9 crashed near Port Pirie in February 1928. Thus Miller realised how risky it was running a business with just one aircraft. However he needed finance to buy bigger and newer machines. Via a friend, Miller approached Macpherson Robertson, a well known chocolate manufacturer. He agreed to finance the purchase of an 8-seat DH-61 Giant Moth at a cost of £5,000. As a result the McRobertson Miller Aviation Company was registered in May 1928.



*DH61 Giant Moth G-AUTL at Parafield
Courtesy D Darian Smith Collection*

Described as the most modern commercial aircraft then in Australia, the new DH-61 was named “Old Gold” after a popular chocolate bar. It commenced operations from the new aerodrome at Parafield, alongside a growing fleet of smaller aircraft, including a Fokker and two Moths. The company commenced flying throughout South Australia, doing all types of work, including charters, medical evacuations and aerial photography. However “barnstorming activities” still formed much of the income. There were no government subsidies to support scheduled services, but Miller became known throughout the whole of regional South Australia.

In October 1929, Miller won an air-race (and £1,000 prize money) from Sydney-Perth held to celebrate the centenary of WA. It was highly competitive and the handicapping system displayed Miller’s prowess as an aviator, navigator and engineer – many of the competitor’s aircraft could not sustain their performance over the long 2,500 mile journey. However, after this the Great Depression began and severely curtailed activities.

The leading airline at the time was Norman Brearly’s West Australian Airlines which operated a Perth-Adelaide service using large three-engined DH-66 Hercules aircraft. This had begun a five-year subsidised service in 1929 that proved highly successful. One morning at Parafield one of the pilots injured himself and convinced Miller to fly the aircraft in his place after a very quick brief on the aircraft. Despite having never flown such a large aircraft before, Miller flew it successfully to the mid-point of Forrest without the passengers any the wiser.



*H. C. Miller Parafield hangar circa 1929-30
Courtesy D. Darian Smith Collection*

As a result of the depression the DH-61 was sold to Western Australian Airlines. It was flown to Perth by Miller in April 1931. Around this time Harry Butler’s widow donated his Bristol monoplane to Miller, which he described as a delight to fly. With a new engine installed, Miller won the South Australian Aerial Derby in 1932. Some thirty years later, Miller donated the aircraft to the town of Minlaton – Butler’s birthplace – where it is displayed in a glass-sided display structure.

Meanwhile the South Australian activities of the McRobertson Miller Aviation Company continued on a smaller scale until almost 1939 when the Department of Civil Aviation ordered them be transferred to Guinea Airways. In 1934 Miller again displayed his forward thinking. Despite a ban on the importation of American aircraft,

Miller purchased a Lockheed Vega which he intended on entering in the 1934 Centenary Air Race from England to Australia. Two pilots were sent overseas to take possession of the aircraft. However during the race, on 21 October 1934 they crashed in Aleppo, Syria. It was packed and sent by boat to Fremantle, where it arrived in January 1935. Repairs took some eight months, and there was then a battle with the authorities over registration of an American aircraft. However it was finally able to fly and beat an RAAF Hawker Demon fighter during an aerial derby later that year. The aircraft was used until the war, when it was impressed by the RAAF. Flying from Maylands, Perth, during the second half of the 1930s it flew as far afield as Adelaide and Darwin.

At this time MMA was to achieve the dream of operating a permanent, scheduled service. It won a government tender to operate a north-west service, formerly pioneered by Brearly's operation. This would soon match up with international services arriving through Darwin operated by Qantas and KNILM. In this way MMA, under Miller, became based in Perth. Initially using aircraft such as DH Dragons, in 1938 the route was modernised with Lockheed Electra aircraft. These proved most successful on the lengthy 2,000 mile route, which connected virtually every significant town along the coastline between Perth and Darwin.

Operations continued during the war, the service being deemed essential. Pilot Jimmy Woods was decorated by the Dutch government for his work in evacuating wounded civilians in an MMA Electra after the Japanese raid on Broome on 3 March 1942. Later, operations were further modernised and expanded using DC-3s. In 1955 the company merged, at the request of the WA State Government, with Airlines (WA) Ltd, to form MacRobertson Miller Airlines Ltd. Operations throughout regional WA were provided.

In 1963, needing funds for new aircraft, the airline became a subsidiary of Ansett. Both Miller and the MacRobertson family sold their shares in the company, although Miller himself remained involved as an employee. Further modernisation took place which included Fokker F.27s and an F.28 jet. The company evolved further becoming Ansett WA in 1984.

Miller retired in 1972 to live in Perth. In 1978 he received the highest aviation award, the Oswald Watt medal, and was appointed O.B.E. Miller himself died in 1980. He had six children, one of whom, Robin Miller, became known in her own right as an aviatrix and nurse fighting polio in remote communities. She was known as "The Sugarbird Lady".

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