

# Sgt. Leroy Miller: Natural Bridge 'Rocket,' US Army Airman, WW2 Purple Heart

~ Eric Wilson, Rockbridge Historical Society, Executive Director

*This profile continues the Rockbridge Historical Society's summer-long series of articles commemorating the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the end of World War II. The virtual series is complemented by pop-up exhibits in local libraries, running from August 15, V-J Day, through September.*

For other related profiles and contexts, visit the RHS ['Virtual WW II Portal'](#) at [RockbridgeHistory.org](http://RockbridgeHistory.org).

It's a puzzling entry in the log book, September 21.

Then gutting, when you realize its abrupt end.

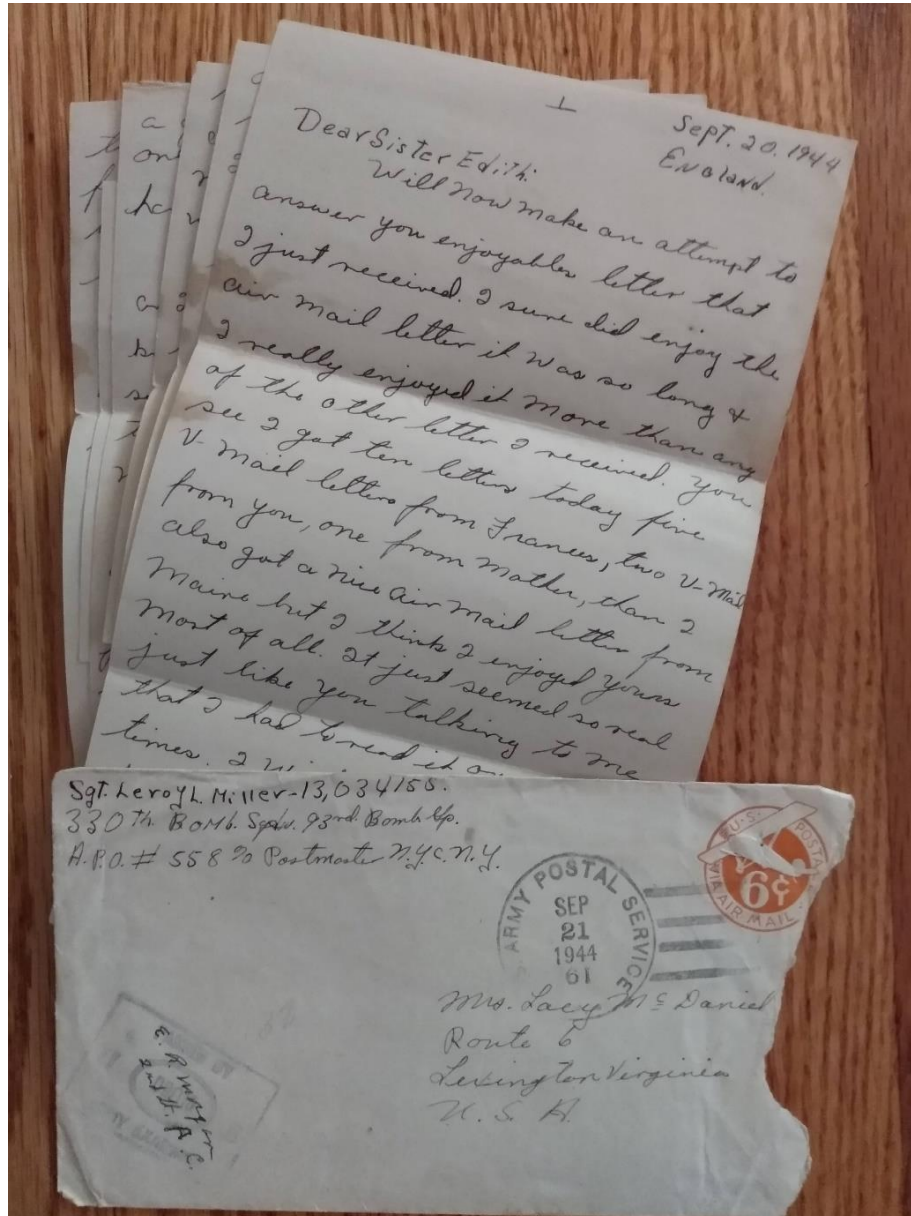
The more routinely logged numbers are punctuated by the last line, on the last page of this folder of personal flight records, bluntly inscribed: "MISSING IN ACTION."

NAME <u>MILLER, LEROY L.</u>		RANK <u>SGT</u>		SERIAL			
POSITION: <u>GUNNER</u>		ORGANIZATION <u>330TH BOMB SQN</u>		<u>93</u>			
DECORATIONS							
AIR MEDAL	1ST CLUSTER	2ND CLUSTER	3RD CLUSTER	D.F.C.	D.F.C. CLUSTER		
COMBAT CREW RECORD							
DATE	TARGET	SHIP NO.	CLASSIFICATION			OPERATIONAL	TIME
			MISSION TO- WARD REEF	DIVERSIONS	PATROL		
9-10-44		284	1			7	4
11		969	2			6	3
12		969	3			5	2
21		969	4			2	2
	<i>MISSING IN ACTION</i>						
			<i>Charles E. Biggers</i>				
			CHARLES E. BIGGERS,				
			CAPTAIN, AIR CORPS,				

But the personally scripted letter, folded in with that same sheaf, would prove even more haunting...

On the night of Sep. 20, 1944, Natural Bridge native Sgt. Leroy L. Miller penned the last letter he wrote, from his air base in England. Writing eight neatly-cursived pages to his eldest sister Edith in Lexington, Leroy opens casually, gratefully itemizing the pieces of V-Mail and U.S. Mail he'd received that day: "five V-Mail from Frances, two V-Mail from you, one from mother. Then I also got a nice Air Mail letter from Marie, but I think I enjoyed yours most of all. It j so real just like you talking to me."

Eagerly angling for more, and asking for news from Rockbridge, he wrote late into the night, unsure as always whether his own news would arrive back home in a similar cascade, or awaited delay. Movingly, in retrospect, he closes by sharing notice of a chapel service that the Army had scheduled for the first Sunday in October, timed so that families back home could join in synchrony, and in prayer.



That last letter was postmarked the next day, before Sgt. Leroy Miller climbed into his plane, the very day that he died in air combat, helping turn the European campaign from that summer's Normandy invasion, toward the Battle of the Bulge that winter, and the final push to Berlin and [V-E Day: May 8, 1945](#) [for more on V-E Day, see this series' [WW2 at 75 RHS Essay](#)].

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To date, Miller had completed 25 months of technical training and nearly 150 hours of airtime, from bases across the United States, the Caribbean, and the Pacific. Having volunteered to join the Army right after Pearl Harbor, he'd finally arrived in Europe in July 1944 to serve as a tail-gunner in a B-24 Liberator Heavy Bomber, 330th Bomb Squadron, 93rd Bombardment Group. But after only three missions with his new team (which had routinely returned in about six hours) his September 21 mission, headed across the English Channel to Germany, would last only 2 hours, 25 minutes.

We don't know if the Miller family received their son and sibling's last letter in time to join that religious service that he'd asked them jointly to observe on Sunday, October 1. It was not until October 5 that The Roanoke Times listed him as M.I.A., with the family informed that he'd been killed in action, later that month. His local memorial service would be held on November 12, 1944. One day after Veterans Day.



### Leroy L. Miller Dies In Action Over Germany

Sgt. Leroy L. Miller of the army air force, aged 22 years, was killed in action over Germany on Sept. 21 according to notice received Oct. 30 by his parents, Mr. and Mrs. John Miller at Natural Bridge. They had been notified Oct. 5, that he was missing.

Sgt. Miller volunteered soon after Pearl Harbor and was called to service Jan. 6, 1942, at Camp Lee, Va. He was assigned to the air corps at Keesler Field, Miss. In February, 1942 he left Keesler Field for foreign service and was in British West Indies for 25 months.

Ten months later, another personally handwritten letter would arrive from a fellow airman, written by Sgt. D.A. Lennon on Aug 7, 1945, the day after another U.S. bombing squadron had dropped the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima: "I left [Miller] and the crew on the morning of Sept. 21, 1944, the day he was killed in a mid-air collision over Belgium ... And they are all buried beside each other there in Belgium. I really don't know how to write a letter like this as I don't want to hurt your feelings any more than they have already been hurt."



Leroy Miller and his crew-mates flew a B24 Liberator Heavy Bomber of this model, 93<sup>rd</sup> Bomb Group, 330<sup>th</sup> Squadron, based out of England, and heading on missions to Germany. A tail-gunner, Miller flew three missions before the plane was either hit or, according to another soldier who knew them, a year later, had a “mid-air collision.” Eerily, the specific plane pictured above, from the 328<sup>th</sup> Squadron, went down on the very same day, Sep. 21, 1944, also over Belgium: where Miller and his crewmates were buried beside one another, until he was repatriated for burial at his home church in October 1947.

The emotional torque borne by wartime families comes from many angles, each borne in their own ways. And it’s unclear whether Lennon’s candid message arrived before or after the celebrations announcing V-J Day, August 15 (recognizing again, here, the lag that the history of letters entails). Regardless, that coda to Sgt. Miller’s final mission must have arrived with cold comfort to the Miller’s family farm on Plank Road, still in a limbo of loss.



*L to R: John W.; Annie (mother); children: Hunter, Leon, John P., Lawrence. Second Row: Leroy, Marie, Neona; Front: Henry and Murphy.*

It was not until the fall of 1947, that his remains would be repatriated to the United States, part of a convoy of 125 coffins returned to families across Southwest Virginia: a long, local litany of the American dead listed in The Roanoke Times. One of ten children born to John W. and Annie (Ayers) Miller, Leroy Lauderdale Miller was finally buried in the graveyard of the Broad Creek Associated Reform Presbyterian church he'd been raised in, the very church founded in the 1770s by his Miller ancestors, among the earliest white settlers into the Natural Bridge area.

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There's another 'log book' to reckon with, in the box of family mementos. But in counterbalance to that first tragic ledger, pointing to a young man fallen from the skies, these entries are positively uplifting.

This chart gives a glimpse into Leroy's younger years: his 10th grade report card from Natural Bridge High School, spring of 1939. The Nazi invasion of Poland was still a summer away, a long way from Rockbridge County.

Like most human endeavors – no less than the arcs of a future airman – Leroy's marks were a bit up and down. No grade inflation here, during the tail end of The Great Depression. D's and C's in English; C's and B's in Algebra; mostly A's and a stray B in both Latin and European History, the courses where he earned his highest grades.

Save one.

None of us want to be merely remembered as the sum total of our report cards, nor that of the military or professional evaluations we receive. But it's hard not to dwell on the final entries of this revealing record, at bottom right.

At the age of 17, Leroy Miller earned straight A's on the line reserved for "Character." With that meaningful, mindful consistency, he'd already shown himself to be a true Ace.

SCHOOL RECORD												
	FIRST SEMESTER					SECOND SEMESTER					Yr.	
	1	2	3	4	5	Ex. Av.	1	2	3	4		5
<b>LANGUAGE ARTS</b>												
Reading												
Writing												
Language												
Spelling												
H. S. English	D	B	B			63	74	C	C	C	86	79 77
Latin	A	A	A			95	75	A	B	A	97	96 96
Modern Language												
<b>SOCIAL STUDIES</b>												
Virginia History												
Geography												
U. S. History												
European History	C	A	A			85	88	A	A	A	C	87 88
Citizenship												
Government												
<b>MATHEMATICS</b>												
Arithmetic												
Junior Math.												
Algebra	C	B	A			B	85	C	B	C	B	80 83
Geometry												

Name <u>Miller, Leroy</u> Session <u>1938-39</u>												
Address												
	FIRST SEMESTER					SECOND SEMESTER					Yr.	
	1	2	3	4	5	Ex. Av.	1	2	3	4		5
<b>SCIENCE</b>												
Elementary Science												
General Science												
Physics												
Chemistry												
<b>INDUST. ARTS</b>												
Drawing												
Trade—Industry												
Vocat. Agriculture												
Home Economics												
<b>FINE ARTS</b>												
<b>CHARACTER</b>												
ATTEND.—Days Taught	A	A	A			A	A	A				
Days Present												
<b>PHYS. EDUCA'N</b>												
<b>TESTS</b>			<b>DEFECTS</b>			<b>CORRECTION</b>						
Vision				✓								
Hearing												
Weight												
Posture												
Teeth				✓								

P for Promoted: F for Repeat. First Sem.			Second Sem.		
LITERAL	DESCRIPTIVE	NUMERICAL	LITERAL	DESCRIPTIVE	NUMERICAL
A	Excellent	90-100	D	Doubtful	60-70
B	Very Good	80-90	F	Failure	70
C	Good	70-80			

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The box holding all these documents came to the Rockbridge Historical Society in 2019, thanks to the family bequest of Sgt. Miller's nephew, Col. John R. Miller: raised in Rockbridge, a graduate of both NBHS '63 and W&L '67, and a career army officer himself [see [WDBJ-7 TV Feature](#) on the bequest].

This [Donation to RHS' Archives](#) included a wealth of other materials with which to flesh out a life. Fronting them all, a large U.S. Army-framed service portrait of Sgt. Miller in full, formal dress, complemented by several jauntier wallet-sized snapshots of him in uniform; most memorably, in the spirits of youth, one shows him in a sombrero, pulling faces. Other candid photographs show him in easy company: laughing with fellow soldiers, sometimes with guests visiting their bases, as well as a few images captured back home during his first and last leave home to Natural Bridge, March 1944.



Leroy Miller (kneeling, third from left), with fellow soldiers and guests on an outing near his training base in Casper, Wyoming. Taken June 7, 1944, the day after D-Day, his last base after 26 months of aeronautic training in the U.S. Army Forces before heading to England for active combat, with Allied bombers leading the final push towards Germany, with the fall of Berlin 10 months later, V-E Day, May 8, 1945 (for more on V-E Day, see the [RHS Article](#) in this series).

A few dozen letters reveal Miller's everyday thoughts as he wrote home, still folded carefully in their red-white-and-blue Air Mail envelopes. His words are rarely tinged with concern, laughing about how his leg had fallen asleep sitting the wrong way while writing, more focused on the humdrum of military routine, not to mention the unforgiving sand that coated everything in Alamogordo, New Mexico. First based in New Orleans, he earned his wings by spanning the globe: training in Puerto Rico, St. Lucia, Trinidad, Papua New Guinea, even the wilds of Casper, Wyoming before shoving off to England ... and his crushingly brief four flights over Europe.

After visiting home, he thanks a brother for his wherewithal in rounding up a battery and car tags that allowed them, during that brief stay, to ride their way round Rockbridge for a playful spin: “we’d never have had so much fun if you didn’t.” That note reminded John Miller of his uncle’s particular love for cars, for tinkering with all manner of things. And in a postscript to that letter, Leroy once again shows his character, his family conscientiousness during a wartime economy, reminding them they should go back to the car and siphon out its gas, before it evaporated.

With that technical acumen (which would clearly serve him well through his advanced aeronautical training) Leroy briefly worked for the Blueridge Company in Glasgow, between his graduation and shipping off, in January 1942. Among the more locally resonant items in the bequest is an impressively designed Souvenir Program marking the company’s earning the Army-Navy Award for War Production. Headlined by Virginia Governor Colgate Darden and soon-to-be U.S. Senator A. Willis Robertson, the commemorative pamphlet lists Leroy Miller’s name among the 178 local men and women currently serving in the War, as of February 1943.



Commemorative Program for War Production Award for Glasgow’s Blueridge Company, where Miller worked after graduation from Natural Bridge High in 1941, until enlisting after Pearl Harbor. Headlined with presentations by Governor Darden, and soon-to-be U.S. Senator Robinson, listed here are 178 local employees who’d answered the call for service, as of February 1943. One of Leroy’s letters is addressed to the company bulletin board, where soldiers would send group updates.

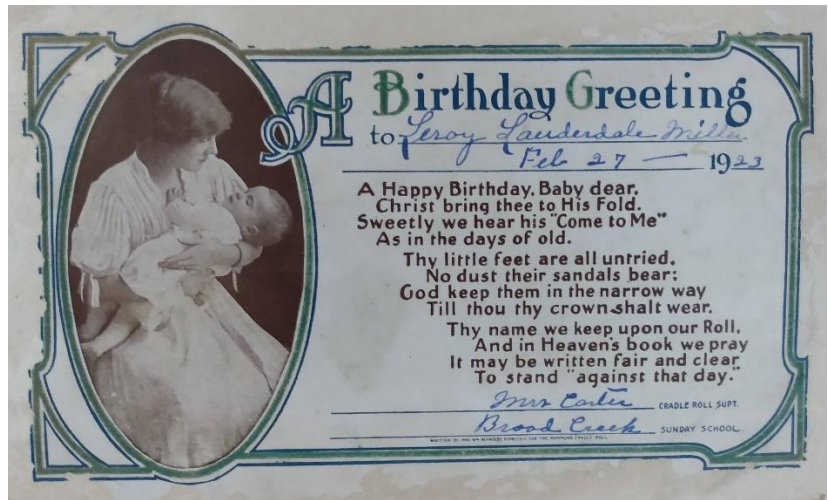
In chronicling the public hallmarks of his military career, his family had compiled a range of regional news-clippings noting his enlistment, promotion, and obituaries, as well as the one that hauntingly reported him as missing, while three of his brothers were still serving abroad. Most poignant of those yellowed clippings is an original 12-line poem titled, “In Memoriam.” Written by sister Edith (Miller) McDaniel on the first anniversary of her brother’s death, it’s prefaced, “A year ago today, our blue star turned to gold.” Gold Star Families, it hits home, are recognized for a member killed in combat.

IN MEMORIAM

MILLER. In sad but loving memory of my dear and beloved brother, Sgt. Leroy L. Miller, who was killed in action over Belgium, September 21, 1944. A year ago today our blue star turned to gold.

The blow was hard, the shock severe,  
 We never thought death so near.  
 But only those who have lost can tell  
 The pain of parting without farewell.  
 More and more each day we miss you.  
 No one knows the bitter pain  
 We have suffered since we lost you  
 Life has never been the same.  
 God called you home, it was his will,  
 But in our hearts we love you still;  
 Your memory is as dear today  
 As in the day you passed away.

By his loving sister,  
**MRS. LACY McDANIEL.**



Spotlighting his younger days are a 1st Birthday Greeting from his church; a card of loving thanks he'd given to his mother and father when he graduated high school in 1941; the last picture taken with him before he left, family full-gathered around the dining-room table.

In another photo taken back at the Miller farm, during that sole 1944 homecoming, Leroy stands in uniform, smiling with his arm around his high school sweetheart, Frances Conner. Family members say they expected the couple to marry. Among the personal effects sent home after his death were three pictures of her, this one signed on the back: "With all my love and devotion & loads of kisses, Frances."



Natural Bridge natives Leroy Miller and Frances Conner, on his only leave home, April 1944. On the back, she writes, "With all my love and devotion & loads of kisses, Frances." In a 1943 letter to his brother, Leroy confides that he'd realized how much he loved her, after deploying. Family members note they expected the couple to marry.



For his part, Leroy had confided to his brother John in April 1943, “As you said in your letter that you believed Frances would be waiting for me, no matter how long, I am going well. From the letters she writes me, I think she will too. Anyway, I hope she does. I didn’t realize how much I did love her until I left, and I didn’t think that she loved me the way she does, until after I left.”

Two final objects stand in for the joint standards of religious and military service, so clearly valued by the Miller family: Leroy’s pocket-sized Army-issued Service Prayer Book; and, pinned together with his U.S. Airman’s lapel wings, the posthumous Purple Heart he was awarded, in final honors.



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The descendant lines of Leroy’s nine siblings have since moved beyond Rockbridge. But nephew John Miller drove from Roanoke to the RHS Museum so these items could be stewarded here in the contexts of local history: preserved, brought to order, interpreted, and shared in the communities that he and his uncle both called home.

Here, they can lastingly be enjoyed by visiting relatives, descendants of the Millers’ neighbors and friends, fellow alumni and church members, residents whose own family histories resonate with memorial cues like this: before, during and beyond World War II. As an institutional [Donation of a Family Archive](#), the gift also stands as a model for which other families can entrust museums – or other libraries, churches, or schools – to sustain those personal legacies, their character.

In addition to articles like this (archived with others on the [RHS Website’s ‘WWII Portal,’](#) or complemented more broadly by [Ken Burns’ epic WWII PBS Series, ‘The War’](#)), RHS and the Rockbridge Regional Library have partnered to feature some of these artifacts and images in ‘Pop-Up Exhibits’ that will run from the anniversary of the War’s close, August 15, through September 30. Among them, see the profile on S/Sgt. & Marksman [Eugene Sweet, another Rockbridge Purple Heart](#).

Leroy Lauderdale Miller’s displays will remain at the Glasgow Public Library, fittingly near his home, high school, and church. But by rotating other materials and community sites in weeks ahead, RHS is proud to extend these 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary commemorations, while also making its resources and community histories more accessible, especially during pandemic constraints.

Stay tuned for more on RHS Publications, Exhibits and WWII Witness, at [RockbridgeHistory.org](#).



*United States Commemorative Coin, 2020*

*Honoring the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Victory in World War II*

**Eric Wilson, Executive Director**

**ROCKBRIDGE HISTORICAL SOCIETY**

Director for History, Governing Council, Virginia Association of Museums