

THE AMAZING STORY OF CHUBBIE MILLER.

AVIATRIX.

(1902-1972)

By

Reg. A. Watson.

With information re Amelia Earhart at conclusion

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Actress Bijou Phillips portraying Chubbie Miller.

Chubbie Miller has now been virtually forgotten. Yet, she was the first woman to fly from England to Australia and the first to fly across Bass Strait.

Chubbie was married in Melbourne during the early 1920s. She was only 18 and her husband, five years her senior, was a well known Melbourne journalist, Keith Miller.

The marriage was not a success and while Keith would continue with journalism, Chubbie was destined to find romance, adventure and international scandal.

Chubbie's real name was Jessie (Jesse) Beveridge and she hailed from Western Australia. Her father was an English banker and her mother a daughter of a clergyman. Chubbie and Keith's marriage produced no surviving children, having lost a baby born prematurely. What was left between them was not enough to keep them together.

Against the wishes of Keith, although he eventually agreed, Chubbie decided to sail to England to see the world and meet relatives.

A later account of Chubbie described her as a brunette, petite with brown eyes. Her personality was described as charming with uncompromising directness. She was short and was chubbie, hence her nick name.

After arrival in London in 1927, Chubbie took up resident in a one-room flat on 15 Baker Street. She had contacts in London and it was while attending a party she met William Newton “Bill” Lancaster who originally hailed from Birmingham. He was to change her destiny.

Bill was a mature man of 29 years and was married to Kiki. They had two daughters, Nina and Pat. His father, Edward, was a civil engineer and his mother, Maud (Edward’s second marriage) would retain her son’s affection until his untimely death.

His background included a stint in the Australian Army in 1916, having arrived in Australia when he was 16 years of age. He served in the Middle East and in France before joining the Australian Flying Corps to train as a pilot. Later he joined the RAF as a parachutist and was an accomplished boxer and horseman.

Bill had planned to fly solo from England to Australia, but Chubbie with her directness persuaded him to take her and together they left Croydon Airport, June, 1927, to fly to Darwin. They were not attempting to break any speed records, but just flying in such a light craft, an Avro Avian biplane, called the *Red Rose*, would be a record in itself.



Lancaster and Chubbie.

This was to be his second attempt. Chubbie wanted to fly by herself, but could not manage to raise the finances and as she stated her only remaining hope was to secure a passage immediately (Northern Standard Newspaper, Darwin 9 Oct 1934). As a reference

to raise finances, she termed Sir Charles Kingston-Smith as “my old friend”. She was also a friend of Amelia Earhart*.

During the trip, which was beset with hardship, at one time crash landing on Sumatra, Chubbie learnt how to fly and navigate. Their route of the major stoppages were from Croydon aerodrome, London-Paris-Rome-Malta-Tripoli-Cairo-Persia-Kerachi-Calcutta-Singapore-Darwin. At Singapore, they were passed by Bert Hinkler, whose performance has over-shadowed that of Lancaster and Miller.

Nonetheless, on March 19th 1928, they arrived at Darwin, Chubbie being the first woman to fly the route. Australia was to fall in love with the couple, especially Chubbie who was photographed, dined and entertained wherever she went. It was also obvious Bill and Chubbie were much in love. They toured the country, including Tasmania, where they stopped at Hadley’s Hotel in Hobart. (Hobart Mercury newspaper 3 May 1928).

TASMANIA

On their trip to Tasmania, they landed at King Island, then on to Burnie. Chubbie therefore, was the first woman to fly Bass Strait. From Burnie to Launceston, then to Hobart where they landed at Elwick Racecourse, Glenorchy on the Sunday where it has been reported they were met by 25,000 people. The newspaper Mercury stated: “*Such as royalty alone has previously commanded this city*” (30 April 1929).

They receive a telegram from the Premier, Joe Lyons and had dinner at the Hobart RSL where Bill was made a member, he being an ex-serviceman. The following day it was a reception at the Town Hall by the mayor H.K, Wignall where several hundred people had gathered.

An opportunity was taken by a Mr Bill Cross who accompanied them on a flight above Hobart for a promotional tourist film he was producing called *Tasmania at work*.

They then took off from Elwick for the short flight to New Norfolk racecourse then off to Ulverstone where they briefly stopped, then to Penguin and Wynyard. Later to Burnie again and then to Scottsdale. Finally on May 6th they again flew into Launceston (Mowbray). Their plane has developed some problems preventing them from flying back to Melbourne. Consequently they boarded the steamer *Loongana* to sail to the Victorian city.

SYDNEY AND ON...

Both Bill and Chubbie were entertained at the Sydney Town Hall. Bill’s father was present and privately told his son to detach himself from Chubbie as there were rumours. Bill said, “*She’s come through all the hard times and has taken all the hits.*” He would not give her up. He made his intention clear to his wife, Kiki, back in England, but she would never, she said, give him a divorce. Chubbie’s husband, Keith, was more willing.

Chubbie undertook a lecture tour of Australia, but her and Bill's flight was overshadowed by the exploits of Hinkler and Kingsford-Smith. They decided to move to America where their fame had preceded them. In New York, they were given a ticket-tape parade. In the USA, they settled in a rented house at Miami and circulated in high social circles, but financially were in dire straits. Bill lost his job after a crash in Trinidad. Chubbie pushed on with her flying career, but the Depression saw many flying companies go into financial trouble. However, a woman in aviation was a novelty, so they managed.



Chubbie Miller



Chubbie Miller, Bill Lancaster (right) unknown figure, left.

On one occasion (critics called it a publicity hoax) Chubbie got lost on a flight from Havana to Miami. She got caught up in the vortex of a storm. With shades of a Bermuda Triangle mystery, her compass needle collapsed and her plane rotated violently. She lost her orientation, but dived to get bearings. All she saw was the luminous green sea and no land. With her tanks nearly empty she finally spotted land was surprised when she settled on Andro Island in the Bahamas. The news that she was safe made headlines everywhere.



Signed photograph. 1928

Meanwhile Chubbie had received her divorce from Keith, but Kiki held out against Bill. Interestingly enough both Chubbie and Kiki were previously good friends. Entering upon the scene was Charles Haden Clarke (known as Haden) who was to have a marked bearing on their lives. Haden claimed to be a writer and he had promised to write a book about the couple. He moved in with them at their Miami home. Haden was never to write a word; he was never a writer. Initially Bill was taken with Haden, writing in his diary, "*first impression very good.*"

Unfortunately, Haden had a weakness for drink and women. Bill had obtained a job with Latin American Airways and was forced to leave Chubbie and Haden behind. He said to Haden that he trusted him with Chubbie "*absolutely*" and went on his not-too-merry way. With Bill gone, Chubbie was bored, so she and Haden attended parties together. They fell in love and Haden (who had forgotten to tell Chubbie he was already married) asked her to marry him. Chubbie consented and now the only problem outside the continual financial one was to tell Bill.

Bill returned from his flying stint and stopped firstly with friends at St. Louis where there was a letter waiting for him. Haden wrote: "*I did my damndest to make friendship kill my love for Chubbie, but it was a losing fight from the very beginning.*"

Bill was overwhelmed with remorse, but reconciled himself to his loss. He telegraphed, "*Hold your horses kids. Insist on being best man.*"

When he returned to Miami, he embraced Chubbie, but was cool to Haden. Indeed he accused Haden of not behaving like a gentleman. Haden retorted, "*I resent that.*"

What followed was a highly emotional evening with a series of arguments. Finally they went to bed. Chubbie to her room and the men having single beds on the veranda.

Chubbie was later awakened by a loud bang. Bill was calling out to her, "*A terrible thing has happened. Haden had shot himself.*" Haden had been found with a shot to the head.

The suicide of Haden was accepted especially when two notes were found. One was addressed to Chubbie, the other to his mother, in which he begged her forgiveness. After the funeral, however, there were doubts.

The gun used by Haden was Bill's and Haden's mother questioned the signatures on the suicide notes. In consequence, Bill confesses writing the notes, believing suspicion would fall upon him, but he said he did not kill Haden.

Regardless, Bill was arrested and the case against him seemed overwhelming. He was defended by James Carson, a Miami lawyer, famous for never losing a case (The Perry Mason model). After three weeks, Bill was acquitted.

Though found not guilty, it was too much for them. Kiki would still not grant a Bill a divorce and he still loved Chubbie and her love for him had returned. They left America and sailed for England, where they reluctantly parted.

On April 11, 1933, he climbed aboard the cockpit of one of Kingsford-Smith's planes, *Southern Cross Minor*. He was on a tight schedule, flying from England to Cape Town, South Africa. He needed to get to the Cape by Easter Saturday to beat Amy Johnson's record. He was financed by his father.

His second last landing was at Reggan, in the Algerian Sahara, on Wednesday and he took off soon after in the evening ignoring the advice of the French authorities not to do so. He had not had any sleep for thirty hours while flying and took off in the dark. A severe storm was blowing and visibility was reduced to almost nothing. He was well behind Amy Johnson's record and had no hope in beating it. The Southern Cross Minor did not reach its next Sahara destination, Gao, and the French authorities began a comprehensive search. The disappearance of Bill Lancaster reverberated around the world.

For 29 years it remained a mystery until a French military patrol found in 1962 the wrecked plane, Bill's remains and his diary. Chubbie was now Mrs Pugh, having married Flight-Lieutenant John Pugh. She became manager of the Commercial Air Hire and lived in Berkshire.

In an interview January 1936 she said she was "I am broke and am still trying to pay off my debts."

She said that her last flight had been earlier that month which ended in disaster, adding, "I was flying down Africa when I had to make a forced landing and wrecked the machine trying to avoid some natives.

"I came back (to England) with nothing except a few paper parcels and lots of debt.

"I came back from America three years ago with a large-sized inferiority complex. Every little thing I was concerned with had gone wrong. I felt useless and unwanted." (Tasmanian Examiner 15th January 1936)

In February 1962 she heard the news that the remains of her long lost lover was found. After the initial excitement, the realisation that she was now married and had been leading a different life for several decades made her see things in a different perspective. When questioned by a reporter, she replied "*I was young and foolish then and I want to forget the episode.*"

The French army took Bill's remains which were mummified laying beneath the framework of a wing that had once provide shade. Dried by the dessert air, the corpse's expose skin was like parchment. Above the right eyebrow a gaping cut sustained during

the crash could still be seen. They buried his remains in the city civilian cemetery at Reggan. The French also took Bill's revealing diary. They left the plane where they had found it.

The diary testified how he spent his last eight days after the crash and how he had landed. After leaving Reggan for 40 minutes the engine gave out and Bill glided towards the desert. The landing was hard with the aircraft bouncing over the sand for 50m, finally turning on its back. Bill was slightly injured, but managed to take stock of his situation. He had enough water for eight days, but there was no chance of repairing the plane. He hoped that the French would find him.

The heat of the sun was appalling and there was little shade. His cuts worried him and he was tormented by the pain he knew his parents and Chubbie would be going through over him being missing.

On the sixth day he wrote to his mother and Chubbie: *"If there is another world, if there is something hereafter (and I feel there is) I shall just be waiting. Bill."*

On the seventh day he wrote: *"To my darling mother and my darling Chubbie. I hope you get the log and both read it for my sake."* Bill died Thursday April 20, 1933.

In November 1975, an Australian expedition of 14 people including members of the Royal Queensland Museum recovered Bill's plane. Today it is on display at the Queensland Museum.

An episode on Chubbie Millers is contained in Reg. A. Watson's book, "The Scandalous Adventures of Captain Frederick Watson Wentworth."

*The disappearance of **Amelia Earhart** and her navigator Fred Noonan, in 1937 has fascinated the world ever since. That they were actually spying for the United States, during their last flight, on the Japanese in the Pacific I do not believe there is any doubt. Their aircraft had been installed with sophisticated cameras. Also the United State Government and the Australian Government as revealed by FBI correspondence, testifies that vigorous communication between the two nations had been entered into regarding their flight. I do believe that they were captured by the Japanese and that Amelia was executed. There is a peculiar letter in the FBI files stating that Noonan, after their disappearance, held land on the Japanese island of Hokkaido and that well-seasoned service veterans would be able to bring him out successfully and back to the US. The meaning of this is quite bewildering. Was Amelia now dead and Noonan had been taken to Japan? How come then he owned land?

Amelia and Noonan left Darwin with their intention to go to Howland Island in the Pacific, stopping at Lae, New Guinea on the way. Yet Howland Island is just a small blot on the Ocean, making landing on the island almost impossible. There is the belief that the two were rescued by a Japanese fishing boat and then handed over to Japanese

authorities in the Marshall Islands. After being captured by the Japanese as spies they were taken to the island of Saipan and there Amelia was executed by firing squad after Noonan had been beheaded. Witnesses on the island testify to this as did this General Alexander Vandegrift, Marine Corps in 1971.

In a 1949 article, Amelia's mother said it was her belief that she was indeed captured by the Japanese and taken to Japan. She also makes the claim that Amelia while there, made a phone call to Washington. This is quite bizarre, but we must remember this was before the USA and Japan were at war and that she would have possibly been (and Noonan) treated as a prisoner and if they had indeed executed them it would incur much displeasure from the Americans. After war was declared it would have been a different matter.

There is a photograph (following) said to be of Amelia after being rescued. It is a possibility although not conclusive.



Amelia (supposedly) is the central female figure sitting down.