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Cindy Lou Dale turns the spotlight on a maverick pilot who – 90 years ago – revolutionised the airways over South Africa and effectively created the country's most famous airline.

The Major breakthrough for South African aviation

It all kicked off in 1929 when Major Allister Mackintosh Miller founded Union Airways in Port Elizabeth on South Africa's east coast.

An early aviation pioneer and entrepreneur, Allister Miller (commonly referred to as the 'Major') contributed significantly to both military and civil aviation during the first half of the 20th Century.

He joined the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) in World War 1 and the South African Air Force in World War 2; in between he set up Union Airways – the predecessor of South African Airways.

At the outbreak of The Great War, Miller joined the British Army; then a year later transferred to the Royal Flying Corps and trained as a pilot. He fought over Belgium and France's western front.

He was posted back to South Africa on an RFC recruitment drive and persuaded more than 2,000 men to enlist with the corps. Most were accepted and were sent to England for pilot training. Later they were known as 'Miller's Boys'.



After WW1, the Major pursued a career in civil aviation. His first two ventures were short-lived: the South African Aerial Navigation Company, which became South African Aerial Transports Ltd (1919–1920), and Rhodesian Aerial Tours (1922).

The Major was elected a member of South Africa's parliament in 1924. In this capacity, he successfully lobbied for government backing of civil aviation.

This was an age of dreamers and schemers – and the Major had a plan. He gave flying demonstrations, toured the country to popularise aviation and encouraged the formation of flying



Flying high: SAA has a presence in 19 countries and a fleet of 48 aircraft.

clubs. His plans were big, and the way he saw the future was simple.

He saw an opportunity with the postal system. On Monday mornings, mail would be collected from the Union Castle steamships from Britain, docked in Cape Town harbour.

His plan was to fly the mail to Port Elizabeth in a de Havilland DH 60 Gipsy Moth bi-plane. In Port Elizabeth two further Gipsy Moths would be waiting to continue the service, one to fly mail to Bloemfontein and Johannesburg and the other to East London and Durban. Three days later the return service would reach Cape Town in time for the departing UK-bound steamships.

Thus, in an extraordinary feat that had never been attempted before, the Major lowered his slight frame into a BE2e bi-plane, built by

Wolseley Motors, and attempted South Africa's first ever airmail delivery, flying the 528-mile journey from Cape Town to Port Elizabeth. From Young's Field airbase, he flew for five hours and 18 minutes, at an altitude of 5,000 feet, travelling at 70mph. He touched down on the 18th fairway of the Port Elizabeth Golf Club, the first aircraft to ever land at the city.



The *Eastern Province Herald* describes the scene: "Major Miller's approach was signalled from Humansdorp at about 11h25 and the great crowd on the golf links watched the south-western sky with excited expectancy. There was a cry, which rapidly swelled when a dot, no bigger than a butterfly, swung over the hills some miles away, and for the next 13 minutes every head was craned skywards. Major Miller made straight for the landing place.

"The bi-plane grew rapidly larger till its chief details were easily visible. The sun caught it and transformed it into a thing of gold with scintillating points where metalwork caught the rays. The flashing circle of the revolving propeller grew distinct and twin feathers of smoke from the exhausts streamed out behind. A bird in flight was not more graceful, and the air hummed with exclamations of admiration.

ALLISTER MACKINTOSH MILLER, WAR HERO AND PIONEER

Born in Schombeni, Swaziland, in 1892, Allister Mackintosh Miller was schooled at St Aidan's College, Grahamstown. He spent a year at Rhodes University before enrolling as an engineering student at City and Guilds College, London University in 1912.

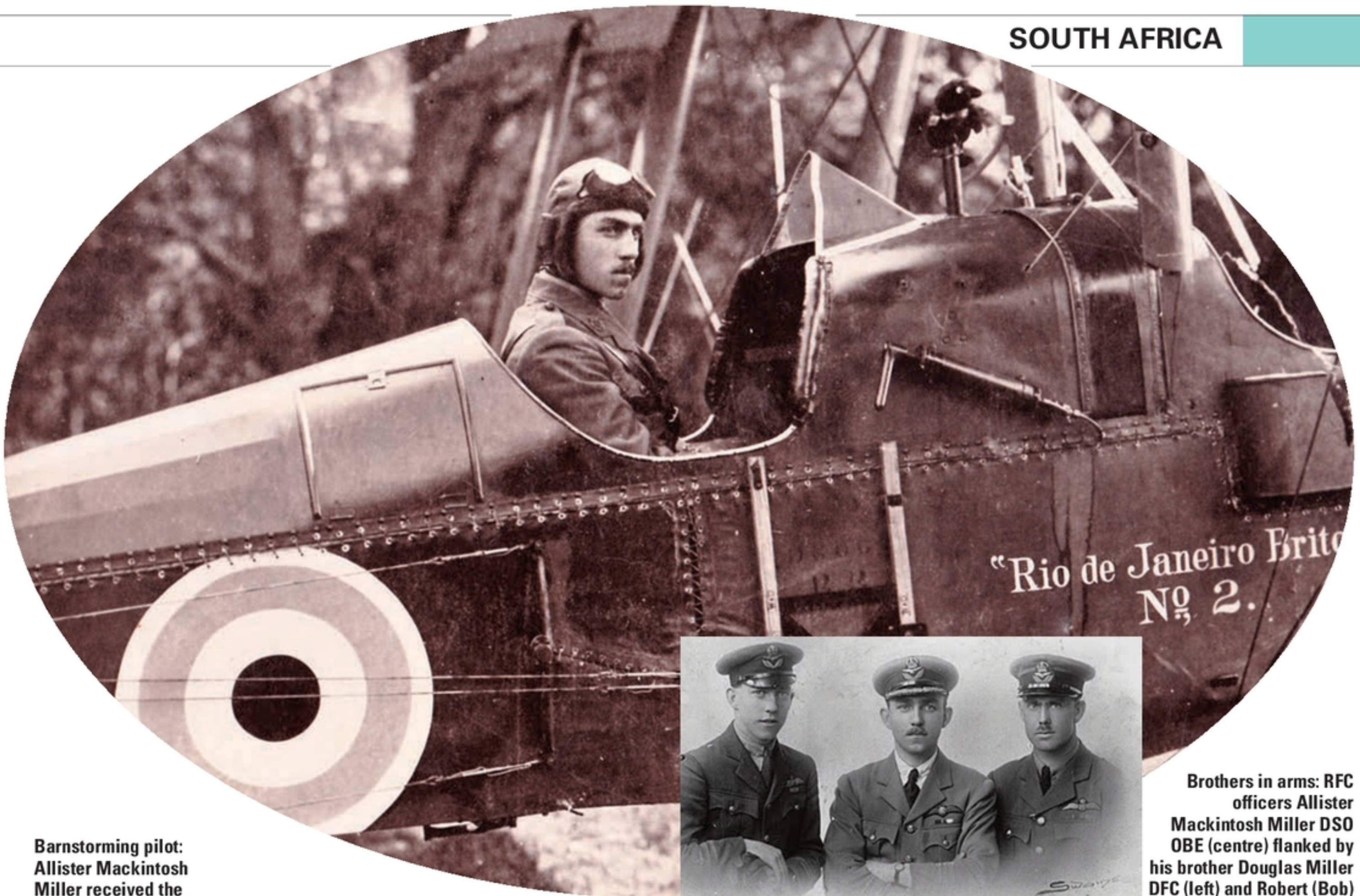
He received the OBE and DSO, retiring at the end of WW2 as a Lieutenant Colonel. Nevertheless, he is remembered as 'Major' Miller because it was in this rank that his great reputation was won.

War hero, recruiting officer for the RFC, barnstorming pilot, pioneer, founding father of South African civil aviation, devout family man and husband

to Marion Mercy, member of parliament, aviation entrepreneur and great gentleman, generous to the extreme, the Major wrote a magnificent page in South Africa's aviation history.

He was laid to rest in Port Elizabeth in 1951 with little more than a small bust in the South African Air Force Museum in Port Elizabeth to remember him by – and the road leading to Port Elizabeth's airport, which bears his name.

For those needing something a little more tangible, all that needs doing is look up, his legacy is up there, flying between the sun and the stars.



Barnstorming pilot: Allister Mackintosh Miller received the OBE and DSO.

Brothers in arms: RFC officers Allister Mackintosh Miller DSO OBE (centre) flanked by his brother Douglas Miller DFC (left) and Robert (Bob) Lovemore DSO.

“It circled twice, dropping in altitude all the time until, at a couple of hundred feet, a white message bag was dropped to the waiting crowd of around 5,000 – all fascinated at the concept of flight and witness the arrival. He volplaned (glided) down to the fairway, dashed towards the green, but was forced to crash his craft into a fairway bunker as over-eager spectators rushed out in welcome. The only damage to the plane was a broken propeller, which was presented to the golf club as a memento of an historic occasion.”

Coupled with this feat, was the fact that the Major carried 80 copies of the *Cape Times* newspaper, as well as some mail. As such, this mail rightfully claimed the title of first airmail from Cape Town to Port Elizabeth.

In 1929, after obtaining financial backing for a commercial air service, the Major founded Union Airways, South Africa's first commercial mail carrier between Cape Town and Port Elizabeth. Soon thereafter, Union Airways was awarded a government contract to deliver mail to other major centres throughout the country.

Originally a mail carrier with a fleet of just five DH60 Gypsy Moths, Union Airways began transporting passengers once a Super Fokker Universal and two DH Puss Moths joined the fleet.

Funded by the Atlantic Refining Company and a small government subsidy, they were struggling to make ends meet until four years later, when

A legacy upon which to build

In 1888, the Major's father, Allister M Miller, arrived in Mbabane, a town in Swaziland founded by canteen-keeper Mickey Wells. It was later established by the British as the capital of the small protectorate.

Two months after Miller's arrival, King Mbandzeni appointed him as the resident justice in charge of the Mbekelweni district.

A year later, he was appointed a permanent secretary and agent of the king. This position earned Miller Snr a place on the Swaziland Government committee. He was a go-between of the king and European business interests and was responsible for registration of documents and the transfer of grants.

As a trusted friend of the Swazi people, and prominent white settler, Miller became their advisor. Nine years later he founded *The Times of Swaziland*, which was geared as the settler's platform to criticise the colonial government. By then he was affectionately known to the Swazi people as Mabhala (writer).

South West African Airways, already successfully providing a weekly airmail service between Windhoek and Kimberley, bought a substantial share in the Union Airways.

But the nail in the proverbial coffin was when a couple of Union Airways planes fell in 1931. It was a major blow to the airline and forced the Major to approach the South African Government to take over the operation.

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Thus, in 1934, Union Airways, with its 40 staff members and fleet of seven aircraft, was bought out by the South African Government, which rebranded its new acquisition as South African Airways (SAA).

It became clear that Johannesburg would become the country's aviation hub, so SAA moved its headquarters from Durban to Rand Airport in Germiston in 1935. This coincided with SAA's launch of the Rand-Durban-East London-Port Elizabeth-Cape Town services, transporting 3,074 passengers in its first year.

Within five years, SAA had 29 Junkers in operation. Now it has a presence in 19 countries and a fleet of 48 aircraft.

In 2017, SAA transported more than 6.8 million passengers around the world and provided employment to 9,856 people. ■