

Maureen Stevens

Voice of ground control at RAF Scampton who captured the heart of a bomber pilot as he flew back from a raid over Germany

The moment he heard the voice of Maureen Miller guiding his bomber home from Nazi Germany, Flight Lieutenant Steve Stevens was enamoured. She was the first woman he had heard speak from the control tower, and one of the first half a dozen to be trained to do so across the country.

With his feet back on the ground Stevens mustered his courage and climbed to the control room, determined to ask her out. The dread of night-time sorties over enemy territory, however, was nothing like that of the sight of this beautiful woman, holding court among a crowd of servicemen, and so he crept away. The life of an RAF pilot did not leave room for diffidence. The next day he tried again and, having arranged a date, was called away on a mission before he could cancel it, leaving Miller with the impression that she had been jilted.

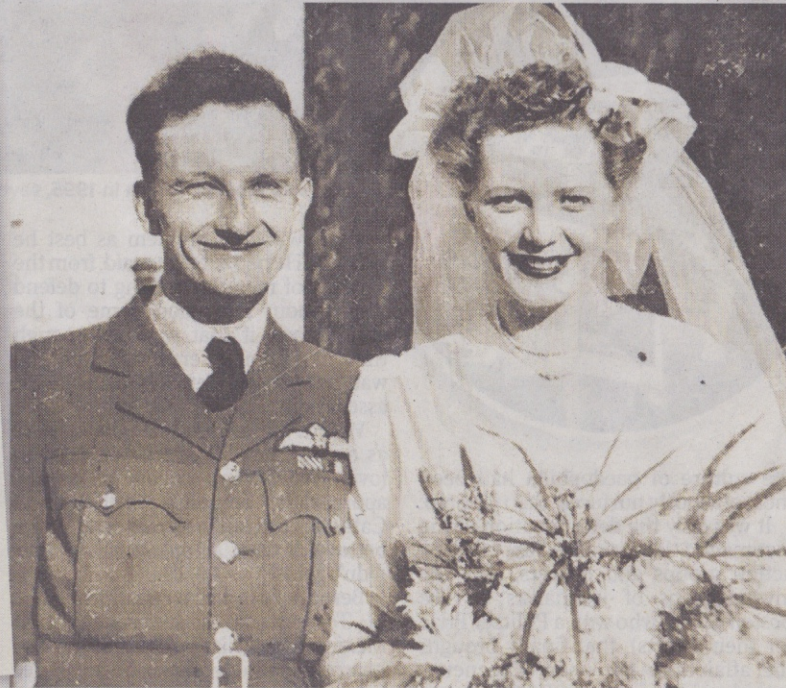
Presaging the opening scene of *A Matter of Life and Death* (1946), in which squadron leader Peter Carter, played by David Niven, declares his love to his ground controller mid-flight, Stevens persuaded Miller to give him a second chance the next time he heard her over the cockpit radio. Within weeks he had proposed. "If I'm still alive by the end of the year," he said, "let's get married." They were married in December 1943 and stayed together for 74 years.

She was born Maureen Miller in Norwich in 1919. Having left school at 14 and worked in various jobs, Miller volunteered for the Women's Auxiliary Air Force in 1941. Thinking that she would be assigned secretarial work, she so impressed her interviewers with the clarity of her speech that they asked her



to be the voice of the control tower at RAF Scampton. It was in this capacity that on the dawn of May 17, 1943 she landed the surviving planes of the 19 sent out on the Dambusters mission. "That particular night there was nothing out of the ordinary," she recalled. "The only thing I remember really clearly is the unusually calm atmosphere as I came off duty at 8am."

When asked to talk about her work in the WAAF for a TV documentary later in life, she was perplexed by the suggestion that there was anything



Maureen Stevens and her husband, Steve Stevens, on their wedding day in 1943

extraordinary about it. Beating Hitler was just a job that had to be done, she felt; having helped do it did not make her a celebrity.

Without such a stolid attitude she might not have made it through her first night in the control tower, when a plane on the landing strip caught fire, incinerating everyone inside. "I went racing down the stairs," she recalled. "I just wanted to get out, but the man in charge pointed to my seat and said, 'Miller! Your place is there.' So I came back and sat down."

Not one to let herself be overwhelmed by the vicissitudes of war, she did not remember ever doubting that Steve would return from his missions unscathed. "I still remember the time his plane came in late," she recalled on their 70th anniversary. "The control tower officer was worried, but I said, 'He'll be all right.' And he was."

By the end of the war Steve had flown 30 missions and his wife was pregnant with their son, Adrian. They lived in Steve's parents' house until Adrian was six. She did not mind the wolf-whistling

from the soldiers in the barracks down the road, but she was unnerved when two-year-old Adrian picked up their nickname for her: "Blondie".

Stevens found herself a job working as a secretary at the Colman's factory in Norfolk. After years swept up in the course of history, this was a time of calm. She enjoyed her job. Her husband became a teacher. The release of *The Dam Busters* in 1955 was a pleasing reminder to them of the parts they had played in saving the country from

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Hitler. Stevens retired from Colman's aged 60 to a quiet life, of which the joys included walking trips to Exmoor and Dartmoor, rambles in the nearby Norfolk broads, dressmaking and knitting.

One of the great pleasures that old age held for the couple was their involvement in the Royal British Legion, which Adrian said was like an extended family for his mother. Stevens assisted her husband in his duties with the local branch, where he became president, for 25 years.

In her final months she bore her declining health with sangfroid. Whenever her son visited her in hospital he would find her chatting to the nurses with the same bonhomie with which she once held up the morale of the airmen at her Lincolnshire base.

Maureen Stevens, WAAF ground controller, was born in Norwich on December 9, 1919. She died on December 4, 2017, aged 97