

THE ARMY AIR FORCES ORCHESTRAS

“I SUSTAIN THE WINGS”

“MUSIC WITH WINGS”

GLENN MILLER

FELIX SLATKIN



Dedicated to the Glenn Miller Birthplace Society

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Prepared by
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Glenn Miller Collections



Gen. H. H. Arnold

Global Mission

Major Glenn Miller and fellow musical professional M/Sgt. Felix Slatkin were vital assets in a highly coordinated and imaginative media vision enacted by the United States Army Air Forces immediately before and during World War II. This concept, directed by the visionary commanding General of the Army Air Forces, Henry Harley Arnold, included the following vital objectives:

- Inform the American people about the necessity and characteristics of an Air Force
- Recruit Americans to join the AAF.
- Fund the AAF.

The U.S. Army Air Forces came into existence on June 20, 1941. The AAF boldly identified itself on radio and in films as the “Air Force.” The Army continued to identify AAF officers and enlisted personnel as members of the “Air Corps.” When Germany invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, the Army Air Corps consisted of 43,118 people. The new AAF ultimately included 2.4 million men and women. Gen. Arnold’s immediate priorities were:

- Develop and manufacture aircraft in massive quantities.
- Establish a global logistics network to supply, maintain, and repair the AAF.
- Recruit and train flying and technical personnel.
- Sustain the health, welfare, and morale of AAF personnel.

By 1942, a remarkable transformation was creating the most powerful air force in the world. To market the Army Air Forces, General Arnold made the most assertive use of radio and motion pictures by any of the uniformed services and enlisted top level media talent to do so. The American public of 1942 did not really know what an air force was. Heavily invested in innovative science and engineering, the AAF amounted to a “high tech” branch of the armed forces. Arnold gathered around him a brilliant group of officers who intuitively knew how to secure the support of industry and government to build modern planes and air bases. They developed the largest educational system in the world to train flying and ground personnel. Colleagues including aviator Lt. Col. Jimmy Doolittle went on active duty before Pearl Harbor to convince industrialists such as Edsel Ford to convert from automobile manufacturing to building massive airplane manufacturing plants at locations such as Willow Run, Michigan. Arnold recruited the airline industry to create a global air transportation network. The AAF also reached out to the entertainment industry for talent to staff radio and motion picture production units.

To sell the idea of aviation as an effective form of warfare, Arnold hired Rex Smith, editor of *Newsweek*, and William Westlake, public relations manager of Transcontinental and Western Airlines (TWA). They designed themes centered on education, job training, safety, and satisfaction to communicate the mission, responsibilities, and challenges of the AAF to the public. Specialized media organizations were formed to further AAF objectives, including a Motion Picture Production Unit and Radio Production Units (RPUs) consisting of actors, orchestras, and production personnel.

Radio Production Units

The AAF established the first RPU in 1942 at Santa Ana Army Air Base, California, headquarters of Maj. Gen. Ralph Cousins’ Western Flying Training Command. Maj. Eddie Dunstedter was commanding officer, and M/Sgt. Felix Slatkin was the music director. Slatkin shared duties with M/Sgt. Harry Bluestone, who transferred to Fort Worth, Texas, in 1943. Slatkin and Bluestone were classically trained musicians and musical directors for film studios. A large and talented group of virtuoso musicians, composers, arrangers, announcers and actors assembled at Santa Ana for what would be an ambitious and exhausting schedule of broadcasts, recordings and personal appearances. Among them were future motion picture and television composer and arranger Earle Hagen and announcer Hal Gibney.

The AAF 1st Radio Production Unit (RPU) was soon broadcasting four network programs, *Soldiers with Wings*, *Hello, Mom*, *Roosty of the AAF*, and *Wings to Victory*. The RPU recorded programs for the Office of War Information (OWI), including *Music with Wings*, *Music from America*, and *Uncle Sam Presents*. The AAF 1st RPU was eventually moved into joint quarters with the AAF 1st Motion Picture Unit (18th AAF Base Unit) in Culver City and was ultimately designated the 38th AAF Base Unit (Radio Production).



M/Sgt. Felix Slatkin



First Army Air Forces Radio Production Unit and Orchestra

In March 1943 NBC executive Maj. Francis Healy, public relations officer for the AAF Flying Training Command in Fort Worth, put together an RPU and arranged for a thirty-minute period with Mutual on Monday at 6:30 p.m. EWT. Among the personnel he brought in were Capt. Robert Jennings (radio producer), M/Sgt. Harry Bluestone (music director), Lt. William Holden (announcer/actor), Lt. Elmo Israel Ellis (writer), Lt. Donald Briggs (special events reporter), and Sgt. Elmer Bernstein (musical arranger). As with Santa Ana, almost all had radio or film experience. The title for the program Healy designed was *Army Air Forces*, first broadcast July 19 from Majors Army Airfield. When the RPU transferred to Fort Worth Army Airfield, the program was broadcast from the stage of the Will Rogers Memorial Auditorium.

Enter Glenn Miller

The Army Specialist Corps was a military expediency to fast-track musicians, producers, actors, theater managers, dramatics professors, and recreational and hospitality professionals into the Army with the aim of ramping up Special Services to serve the vast influx of Americans streaming into the armed forces. From the start, the controversial program drew the resentment of the military bureaucracy and scrutiny from members Congress concerned about “special treatment” for celebrities to avoid the draft. Political pressure forced the army to fold the ASC in November 1942, but not before 918 officers completed the ASC orientation course at Fort Meade, Maryland. The most notable among them was Capt. Glenn Miller, who enlisted after disbanding his popular dance band on September 27, 1942. On November 25, two days after completing the course, Miller received orders to report to Maxwell Field, Alabama and the Army Air Forces.

Miller reported for duty at Maxwell Field on December 8 as assistant special services officer. His job was to orient himself to the AAF and learn about the Flying Training Command. Miller got together with the members of the 304th and 305th AAF Bands, commanded by Capt. James E. Murphy. Capt. Herbert F. Sheffer, the special service officer at Maxwell Field, took Miller on orientation visits to several air bases. Miller made public appearances on behalf of the Flying Training Command including a coast-to-coast *Army Hour* broadcast originated by Montgomery radio station WSFA. Recent draftee and University of Alabama graduate Elmo Israel Ellis wrote this first AAF radio scripts for Miller. Miller was very pleased with Ellis and recommended him for Officer Candidate School at Miami Beach. After graduation, Ellis ended up with the Fort Worth RPU. Ellis was the first of a number of talented young airmen who caught Miller’s eye and whom he earmarked for key positions.

Miller was relieved of duty at Maxwell Field and assigned to the Technical Training Command, Knollwood Field, North Carolina, with a station at Atlantic City on January 1, 1943. He reported at Knollwood Field on January 2, en route to Atlantic City. From the moment he transferred to the AAF, Miller was effectively working for HQ AAF, Washington DC, and the public relations office of the commanding general.

The AAF accurately promoted its Flying and Technical Training Commands as “the world’s biggest university.” Gen. Barton Kyle Yount, a West Point classmate of General Arnold, ran the AAF Flying Training Command. His staff of 250 officers and 350 civilian administrative personnel directed nationwide operations from downtown Fort Worth and offices located in the Texas and Pacific (T&P) Railway Building. Gen. Walter R. Weaver was in charge of the Technical Training Command, headquartered at the Pine Needles Inn near Knollwood Army Airfield, Southern Pines, North Carolina. Weaver implemented the unprecedented idea of utilizing hotels at Miami Beach, St. Petersburg, and Atlantic City for Basic Training Centers, Officer Candidate and Technical Schools. Weaver told the press, “The best room is none too good for the American soldier.” At Miami Beach, high-profile candidates from entertainment and sports included Clark Gable, Gilbert Roland, John Carroll, William Holden, Robert Preston, Bruce Cabot, Don Budge, Ben Hogan, and Hank Greenberg. Weaver instructed Miller to “just use my name” to cut through red tape, and Yount later gave Miller the same extraordinary *carte blanche* authority. On January 4 Miller submitted a memorandum to Weaver dealing with the proposed function of an AAFTTC music program and radio broadcasting activity. This is what Miller gave up his civilian fortune to do, and Weaver enabled him to do it. Weaver approved and, for the most part, implemented Miller’s proposal, which included the formation of a second radio production unit on the east coast.

Director of Bands

At TTC Basic Training Center #7, Atlantic City, New Jersey, Miller built upon the personnel of the Twenty-Eighth and Twenty-Ninth AAF Bands to form the new radio production unit and orchestra, including M/Sgt. Norman Leyden (leader and arranger), Sgt. George Ockner (violin and concertmaster) and Sgt. Hank Freeman (alto saxophone). He obtained the transfers of Miller M/Sgt. Zeke Zarchy (trumpet) from Boca Raton Army Airfield, Pvt. Herman “Trigger” Alpert from Stout Field, Indiana. Bandleader and drummer Ray McKinley enlisted and came directly to Atlantic City, soon joined by Miller’s former chief arranger Jerry Gray and Benny Goodman’s ace arranger and pianist, Mel Powell. From TTC BTC 10 at Greensboro, North Carolina, Miller selected Pvt. Bernie Privin, trumpet, and Pvt. Paul Dubov, radio actor/announcer. In addition to fast-tracking talent for himself, as TTC director of bands, it was Miller’s responsibility to build a network of bands at airbases across the United States. Miller also arranged for his civilian manager Donald Haynes to attend OCS Miami Beach for officer training.

Base commanders assumed AAF bands reported to them and not to an extraordinary remote chain of command. Officers at Atlantic City bristled at the bypassing and improvisation that the celebrated though lowly captain was strangely able to accomplish. This type of pushback was encapsulated in the 1953 motion picture *The Glenn Miller Story* in the scene where an officer reprimands Miller for playing “St. Louis Blues March” for an aviation cadet drill, saying Sousa marches were appropriate, not “blues.” Miller (played by James Stewart) says, “Tell me, Major, are you still flying the same planes you flew in the last war?” This confrontation actually occurred at New Haven.



Capt. Glenn Miller



Second Army Air Forces Radio Production Unit and Orchestra

On March 9 Lt. Col. Richard E. Daley of TTC HQ and Miller met with Lt. Col. Edward M. Kirby, War Department radio broadcasting coordinator. They agreed the new Eastern RPU would work from the network and recording studios in New York as was the Western RPU from Hollywood and Central RPU from Fort Worth. The unit would launch a new network program, *I Sustain the Wings*, and be stationed at the TTC Aviation Cadet Training School at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, the closest TTC station to midtown Manhattan capable of accommodating the new RPU.

The new 418th AAF Band arrived at New Haven on March 28, 1943, joined by Sgt. George Voutsas, former producer/director of the NBC Symphony Orchestra broadcasts (Arturo Toscanini and Leopold Stokowski), talented arranger Sgt. Ralph Wilkinson (from Andre Kostelanetz), high-profile singer and actor Cpl. Tony Martin (Alvin Morris), actor Pvt. Broderick Crawford, Cpl. Addison Collins (French horn) and many others. Some of the talented musicians who played string instruments were confused when they received orders to report to Miller. The men were recognized talents and came from elite orchestras, including the NBC Symphony, Cleveland Orchestra, Philadelphia Orchestra, and the Boston Symphony. Their skepticism disappeared once they came into rehearsals conducted by Miller. They were surprised to learn of his comfort and command with their twenty-one-man section.

The AAF and CBS decided to broadcast the new program *I Sustain the Wings* following a series of test broadcasts originating from WEEI in Boston. They scheduled the first test broadcast for May 29, 1943, at 5:30 p.m. EWT from Woolsey Hall at Yale University. The WEEI technical producer was Marjorie Ochs, a rare female radio engineer. After a sixth and final trial run on July 3, Miller was satisfied that *I Sustain the Wings* was ready for a national audience. AAF HQ public relations and CBS agreed to go national from New York with *I Sustain the Wings* beginning July 10 at 2:05 p.m. EWT with the first five minutes of the half hour devoted to a summary of world news. At the last-minute CBS canceled the broadcast because of a mix-up between the AAF and the BPR, which Miller straightened out. The BPR recommended that the AAF minimize credit given to officers and enlisted men of the TTC Orchestra. Miller thought otherwise. His name would attract listeners. It was, after all, because he was *Glenn Miller* that the AAF needed him, and he got his way. Miller used a new theme, "I Sustain the Wings," rather than "Moonlight Serenade," to identify the RPU. His production team included scriptwriters Sgt. Sol Meyer, Pvt. Paul Huston, and Pvt. Ivan Tors, who years later produced the *Flipper* films and television series. Scriptwriter Pvt. Art Arthur, formerly of 20th Century-Fox, wrote the screenplay for Miller's film *Sun Valley Serenade*. Miller transferred talented singer Cpl. Bob Houston (Ivan C. Minott Jr.) to M/Sgt. Slatkin and the Western RPU. He developed a vocal quartet, the Crew Chiefs, consisting of Pfc. Arthur Malvin, Pfc. Stephen Steck Jr., Pvt. Eugene Steck, and Pvt. James Lynn Allison. His arrangers included Pvt. Jerry Gray (Generoso Graziano), also acting as assistant bandleader, and Pfc. Ambrose "Perry" Burgett, who worked for Ray McKinley before joining the Army. During May 1943, Glenn and Helen Miller welcomed their son Steven to the family. The strain of managing the organization at New Haven and the requirements of his TTC assignment were made much more bearable for him by the arrival of his son.

Miller's arranging team put together a series of arrangements for jazz adapted to marches. The radio orchestra recorded several of the charts for the Army "V-Disc" program in a package called *Music for Marching Men*. Probably the best known of the Miller marching library is the Jerry Gray arrangement of "St. Louis Blues March," prepared at the suggestion of Ray McKinley and Perry Burgett. Other prominent jazz adaptations were "Blues in the Night March," "Deep in the Heart of Texas," "Bugle Call Rag," "Jersey Bounce," and "Buckle Down, Winsocki!" Two full drum sets for McKinley and backup drummer Frank Ippolito were mounted on jeeps along with room for two string bassists. A "jeep band" rehearsal was memorialized in a *March of Time* episode with the marching band playing "Blues in the Night March" while the jeeps rolled along in step.

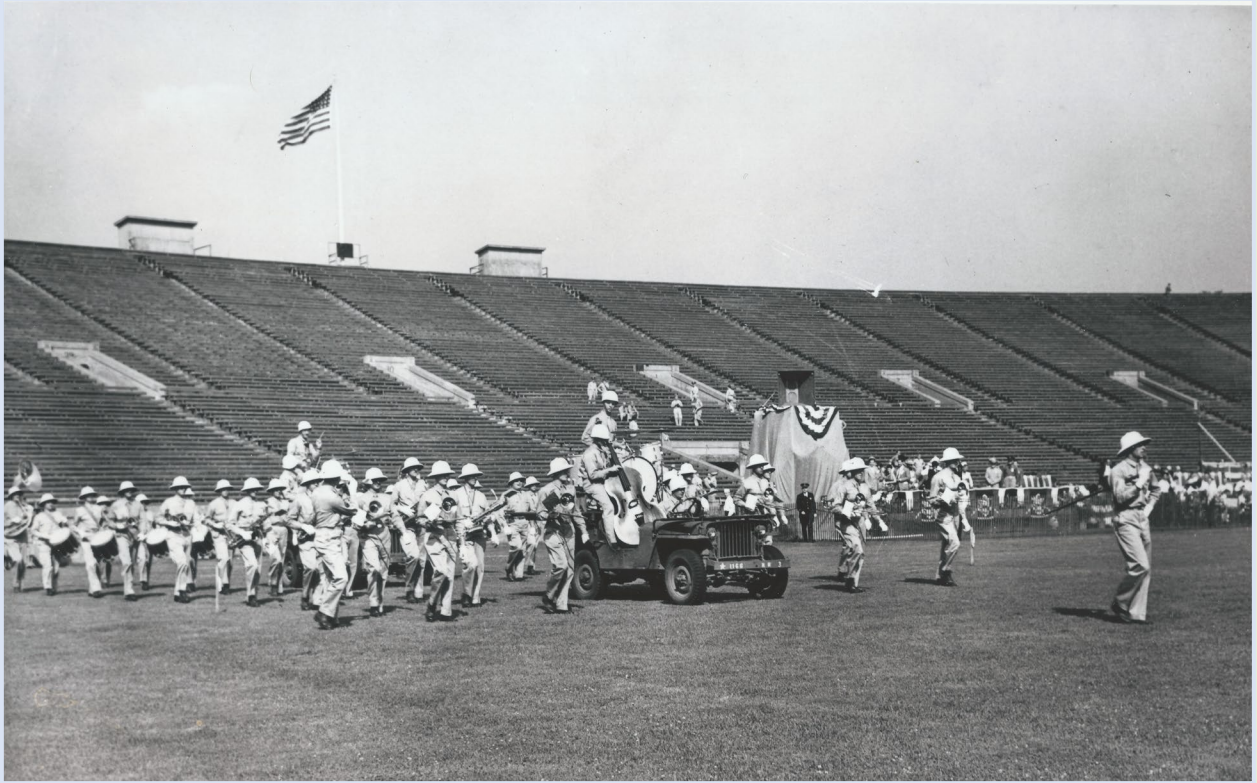
General Arnold ordered the flying and technical training commands combined effective July 31, 1943, creating the AAF Training Command (AAFTC).²¹ On August 10 Miller was relieved of his assignment to TTC HQ Southern Pines and transferred to AAFTC HQ Fort Worth. With this change, Miller's responsibility for TTC bands ended and his complete focus was the radio production element of his music and radio plan. Miller's orders specified he was detached to New Haven from his permanent assignment, AAFTC HQ, Fort Worth, effectively working for General Yount. *I Sustain the Wings* moved from CBS to NBC on September 18, 1943, expanded to early and late Saturday evening time slots, and ran until November 17, 1945.

The AAFTC orchestra recorded an episode of *Uncle Sam Presents* July 17. This was the first in the series of fifteen-minute programs for the OWI, broadcast via shortwave and furnished to the Special Service Division Radio Section for Army radio stations overseas. NBC produced programs using recordings made for *Uncle Sam Presents* for OWI Latin American audiences, *Musica De Las Fuerzas Aereas*. The Eastern RPU recorded *Uncle Sam Presents* until June 1944 and the Western RPU recorded *Uncle Sam Presents* through to August 1945.

Maj. Francis Healy and Lt. Donald Briggs transferred from Fort Worth to New Haven on August 6. Healy became commanding officer of the RPU and producer of *I Sustain the Wings*. Briggs became the RPU adjutant. He is fondly remembered by Glenn Miller fans for closing every *Uncle Sam Presents* program with an emphatic announcement, "This is the United States of America, one of the United Nations."

The September 6, 1943, issue of Time magazine carried the article *Sousa with a Floy Floy*, describing Miller's activities, with comments ascribed to Miller that were critical of military music. Following a brief War Department flap, Miller issued a retraction.

On September 11, 1943, the suave Cpl. Tony Martin appeared on his final broadcast with Miller, who had recommended the popular singer for OCS Miami Beach. During October, Pvt. Johnny Desmond (formerly with Gene Krupa) arrived as Martin's replacement. Soon to be Sgt. Desmond, the smooth singer who "fit" the Miller format so perfectly would serve at home and abroad for the rest of the unit's existence.



Marching (Jeep) Band, Yale Bowl, New Haven, Connecticut, July 1943



Capt. Glenn Miller at NBC

Music from America

On October 29 the AAFTC radio orchestra and marching band went to the Victor Recording Studios in New York for a V-Disc recording session produced by Sgt. Tony Janak. Miller held up the session to clarify the name of the artist and orchestra. The Army told Janak to label the discs simply as the 418th AAFTC Band, an interpretation of a War Department edict to minimize recognition of individuals. Miller refused to proceed until Janak amended the session sheets to read, “Capt. Glenn Miller and the Army Air Forces Training Command Orchestra.” After several hurried phone calls to officials, Janak agreed to include Miller’s name on all subsequent Miller V-Discs. In February 1944 the V-Disc producers started using copies of Miller’s *I Sustain the Wings* broadcasts from NBC as source material for Miller AAF V-Discs. Perhaps because of Miller’s name recognition, the V-Disc program did not prioritize the issue of V-Discs by the Western RPU.

Starting during March 1944, both the First (Western) and Second (Eastern) RPU took on a new assignment, the OWI *Music from America* series. They recorded programs at NBC Hollywood and NBC New York for distribution to the Voice of America, Allied radio stations, and U.S. embassies. Local announcers inserted program opens, closes, and song introductions in multiple languages. The Western RPU took on the additional assignment of the Voice of America series *Music with Wings*.

Miller introduced a vocalist from M/Sgt. Harry Bluestone’s Fort Worth unit on March 18 to share radio duty with Sgt. Johnny Desmond. Cpl. Bob Carroll (Marcus Kaufman) had worked with Charlie Barnet and Meredith Willson and as an NBC staff vocalist. Miller may have wanted to introduce Carroll to the coast-to-coast audience that *I Sustain the Wings* reached over the full nationwide NBC network to promote a future AAF network program to be broadcast by the Bluestone RPU. As it turned out, that would be *I Sustain the Wings*.

Across the Pond

On May 24, 1944, Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, Supreme Commander, Allied Expeditionary Force, requested the transfer of Capt. Miller and the Eastern RPU to London, England for the purpose of staffing the new SHAEF radio broadcasting service. The request was soon approved. Capt. Miller and his unit interrupted a Fifth War Loan tour on June 10, 1944, to return east from Chicago for their transfer to Europe. M/Sgt. Bluestone and the Central RPU with Lt. Holden, Lt. Ellis and Sgt. Bernstein arrived from Fort Worth, became the new Eastern RPU, took over *I Sustain the Wings* all other duties. Production of *I Sustain the Wings* moved from the Vanderbilt Theatre to NBC Studio 3H. Two network programs were added, *Symphonic Flight*, broadcast Sundays from 11:00–11:30 over the Blue Network, and *First in the Air*, heard Friday from 4:00 to 4:30 p.m. over CBS. The RPU continued recording *Uncle Sam Presents* and *Music from America* programs for the OWI. Capt. Miller and his team arrived in Britain and started their work by July 3, 1944. The story of their incredible service overseas is documented in the critically acclaimed *Glenn Miller Declassified* and will be the subject of our 2024 Glenn Miller Birthplace Society presentation and exhibits.



Jazz Jamboree, London, October 17, 1944 – Army Air Forces Band (Special)



National Press Club, November 13, 1945

Homeward Bound

In August 1944 the AAF promoted Glenn Miller to the rank of major. By November, his service and that of his AAF band (Special) earned him a sheaf recommendation for promotion to Lt. Colonel and the award of a Bronze Star. Sadly, while he was planning the transfer of the Army Air Forces Band (Special) from England to France, fate would tragically intervene. For much of December 1944, bad weather caused the cancellation of AAF ATC passenger flights between London and Paris. Maj. Glenn Miller was supposed to be aboard one of those flights on December 14, 1944. Miller, Lt. Col. David Niven and SHAEF were ready to complete arrangements for AEF Paris broadcasting sites and move Miller's orchestra and radio production unit to France. Miller's Air Transport Command flight was canceled, and the prospects looked bad for the next day or more. Frustrated, he accepted an invitation from an Eighth Air Force officer to hitch a ride on a Noorduyn C-64 Norseman courier plane on the afternoon of December 15. Not authorized for casual travel, an impatient Miller disobeyed orders, did not inform SHAEF of his intentions and boarded the plane. The C-64 disappeared over the English Channel, but authorities did not know that Miller was aboard until three days later.

The Army Air Forces Band (Special) continued their decorated service on the Continent until August 1945, ably directed by T/Sgt. McKinley and T/Sgt. Gray. When the "Maj. Glenn Miller Overseas Orchestra" returned, T/Sgt. McKinley and T/Sgt. Gray received the Bronze Star, making a total of four awards for the Army Air Forces Band (Special), including Maj. Glenn Miller and Capt. Donald W. Haynes.

Meanwhile, the Western RPU and Eastern RPU had continued their assignments with distinction. In 1945, the Western RPU became the 38th AAF Base Unit and moved from Santa Ana to Culver City. The Eastern RPU became the 39th AAF Base Unit and moved from New Haven to New York. Effective April 1 M/Sgt. Felix Slatkin and M/Sgt. Harry Bluestone switched assignments, with Slatkin moving to New York and Bluestone moving to Hollywood.

The Miller RPU resumed the *I Sustain the Wings* broadcasts over NBC from NBC Radio City, New York, identified as Major Glenn Miller's Army Air Forces Overseas Orchestra. Personnel from the Slatkin RPU combined with Miller's RPU personnel to fill gaps resulting from discharges. Sgt. Tom Hudson, Sgt. Verne Wilson, and Pvt. John Conte from the Slatkin unit joined Cpl. Paul Dubov as announcers for the *I Sustain the Wings* broadcasts. The Slatkin RPU, likewise augmented with Miller musicians, continued to handle *Your AAF* until the series ended November 3.

The Miller personnel formally transferred into the 39th AAF Base Unit (Second Radio Unit) on October 4. Participation with the V-Disc program resumed using material from *I Sustain the Wings* broadcasts. The sizable unit's 13 officers and 143 enlisted men consisted of the former Miller RPU and Slatkin RPU with additional AAF radio production personnel. Their wartime work successfully completed, the AAF Office of Radio Production decided to cancel all programs and discontinued all the RPUs on October 19. The 39th AAF Base Unit transferred from New York to Bolling Field, District of Columbia, on November 12. The men traveled by rail to Washington for the purpose of discharge and separation from service.

Coda

The National Press Club Members' Dinner for the President of the United States was on November 13 at the Hotel Statler in Washington. The Glenn Miller AAF personnel, directed by Ray McKinley with Jerry Gray conducting one tune, appeared at the event with other guest artists, including Joy Hodges, Joe E. Lewis, Dorothy Shay, Nino Martin of the Metropolitan Opera, and the Murphy Sisters. The master of ceremonies was Eddie Cantor. President Harry Truman was present with many officials, dignitaries, and members of the press. Canadian Prime Minister Mackenzie King, Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, and Gen. H. H. Arnold were among the guests. The curtains parted, and the band played the opening bars of *Moonlight Serenade*. With no hesitation whatsoever, President Truman and Prime Minister King rose to their feet with a spontaneous gesture of appreciation to lead the entire audience in a standing ovation. No popular musician in the history of the United States had ever received this kind of recognition. Beaming with pride, General Arnold brought General Eisenhower to the stage after the president and prime minister departed. Eisenhower thanked the men for the tremendous job they had done overseas and then gave them all their discharge from service. Their historic achievement ended on November 17, when they broadcast, *I Sustain the Wings* over NBC at 11:30 p.m. from Bolling Field. Officially, the 39th AAF Base Unit lingered at Andrews Field, Camp Springs, Maryland, from November 18 to January 15, 1946, for the purpose of discharge. AAF HQ separated all of the men by January 15. Likewise, the the 38th AAF Base Unit at Culver City, California was simultaneously discharged and separated.

The military musical achievements and legacy of the Army Air Forces Orchestras can be readily summed up as follows:

Mission accomplished – with distinction.

We proudly preserve, enjoy and are pleased to respectfully share their awesome music, forever creative, fresh and exciting.

Acknowledgements

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By the author:

America Ascendant, The Rise of American Exceptionalism
Glenn Miller Declassified