

*For Tolina,
our family's flying girl.*

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Soaring
WITH THE
Sugarbird
Lady

THE *Robin Miller* STORY

DIANNE WOLFER



FREMANTLE PRESS



Robin Miller, 1960s.

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CATALINAS ON THE RIVER

I was born with the sound of aircraft thundering overhead as Catalinas came home to roost on the nearby reaches of the river Swan.

Robin watches the sky. A short distance from her home, seaplanes speed across the Swan River, sending sprays of water into the air, before soaring into the sky like big fat ducks. It's 1944, Australia is at war and the aircraft are Catalina flying boats.

The adults are nervous. There have been enemy attacks along the coast, at Broome, Port Hedland, even as close as Exmouth.

Robin's dad says the Catalina pilots are heroes. They're keeping food supply routes open and protecting Perth families from air raids.

Growing up during the war means food rations, clothes rations, knitting socks for soldiers, and practising air raid drills.

Her mother takes drill duty seriously.

‘Run for cover, girls.’

Robin’s big sister Patsy leads the way. Robin holds her little sister’s hand. ‘Hurry up, Julie!’ She drags the toddler to the air raid shelter, and they leap in. Robin stares at the sky wondering what would happen if they really were attacked. Then she presses her freckled nose against the sandy trench wall until an adult shouts, ‘All clear!’

Robin’s mother is the renowned author Mary Durack. The girls fall asleep to the clack-clacking sound of her typing at a cluttered desk. Mary is always working on a new book or project.

Robin’s father, Horrie Miller, was a World War I fighter pilot, and is co-founder of MacRobertson Miller Airlines. He takes Robin, Patsy and Julie to the Guildford aerodrome in his green Chevrolet to watch aircraft take off and land.

‘G’day Horrie!’

The pilots all know Robin’s dad. He’s an aviation legend. They treat him and his daughters with great respect.

Horrie teaches his girls the names of different aircraft.

‘See the Lockheed and Anson?’

They nod.

‘Planes are like people, you know, each one has a different personality.’

He describes the quirks of each aircraft, but when Robin says, ‘Maybe one day *I’ll* be a pilot,’ her dad laughs.

Robin frowns. He’s normally her biggest supporter. At birth, when she was described as ‘a somewhat unattractive baby with a worried face,’ Horrie said, ‘She looks like a Miller.’ It was the beginning of a lifelong bond between father and daughter.

Robin, Patsy and Julie are close in age. The sisters spend their days exploring the bush around their Nedlands home. Robin is a keen birdwatcher. She lies beneath lemon-scented gums, watching clouds, and listening to the calls of honeyeaters and parrots.

‘How do birds stay in the air?’ Robin asks her dad. She knows he loves talking about flying.

‘When a bird’s wing flaps down,’ Horrie explains, ‘the feathers come together.’ He spreads his arms and closes his fingers. ‘Then when the wing flaps up, its feathers spread out to let air pass through.’ He flaps his arms with fingers open, then tells her about uplift and wing aspect ratio.

Horrie’s prized possession is a ten-foot telescope standing on the flat concrete roof of their garage. Robin

sits with her dad as he reads the night sky. While the giant telescope turns, he points to the brightest stars.

‘Tell me about Sirius the dog star,’ Robin asks.

‘Again?’

She nods.



Her dad is often travelling, keeping his business MacRobertson Miller Airlines afloat during the war years.

‘Hooroo,’ he calls each time he leaves the house.

‘Hooroo,’ Robin echoes.

When Robin’s parents are busy, the girls have sleepovers with their Gran. Her home smells of lavender and roses, and Robin feels like she’s sleeping in a garden.

Robin’s great grandfather, Patrick Durack, was a pioneering pastoralist in Queensland before he organised the overlanding of cattle to the Kimberley. After Patrick’s death, Robin’s grandfather, Michael (MP) Durack, managed these vast western properties. The story of this remarkable family will inspire Mary’s soon-to-be-written bestselling book, *Kings in Grass Castles*.

Gran’s tidy house is a treasure trove of porcelain dolls, three-dimensional photographs of faraway places, carved

boab nuts, and stuffed crocodiles with spooky eyes that seem to watch them.

‘A place for everything and everything in its place,’ Gran tells the girls as they listen to her radio and twirl to the music of the Andrews Sisters and Glenn Miller.

On fine days Gran pins on her hat and takes them for drives in her smart black car. Kings Park with its swings, wildflowers and wide open areas is their favourite destination.

KIMBERLEY FLYING ADVENTURES

*We would soar thrillingly above the white houses
of the little port, and veer off along the coast,
sighting schools of dugong, huge manta rays,
turtles, sharks and sometimes even whales.*

The war ends at last in 1945, and it's safe for Horrie to spend more time in his beloved north-west. He buys a bungalow in Broome. The old pearling town is a handy halfway stop for MacRobertson Miller Airlines, on its four-day flight service between Perth and Darwin.

'The house is close to the airport,' Horrie tells the family, 'and just a stone's throw from Roebuck Bay.'

By 1946, Mary is the mother of four children. The youngest, Andrew, is still a baby. To give his wife a break,

Horrie suggests the two younger girls come to Broome and stay with him for a while. Robin and Julie pack their little suitcases and Mary puts them on the DC3 aeroplane.

‘Be good,’ she tells them.

The flight to Broome takes ten hours. Robin is seven years old and notices every exciting detail. Travelling without parents makes her feel very grown up.

‘This way.’ The air hostess helps them find their seats in the pre-dawn darkness.

The trip north is over 2,000 kilometres. They stop at coastal towns, stations and missions to drop off mail, food and people. Flies swarm over their faces as they wait in the shade of a shed.

‘This is boring,’ Julie moans. ‘Let’s play chasey.’ She tags her big sister, and they race about, kicking up dust as they stretch their legs.

After the long hot journey over dry countryside, flying into Broome is a blast of colour. The red pindan earth is fringed by lush green mangroves, and the town is surrounded by turquoise sea.

Warm tropical air greets them as the cabin door opens and their father wheels the aircraft steps into position.

‘G’day, g’day,’ Horrie says. ‘How was the flight?’

‘Amazing!’ Robin says, beaming.

They climb into his jeep and drive towards the bay. The salty breeze smells like adventure.

‘Here we are.’ Horrie opens the front door.

Their bungalow is raised on cement blocks to stop wood-eating termites, and the windows have cyclone-proof shutters. The girls fall asleep to the sound of the tide creeping through the mangroves and the crackle of the radio.

‘This house used to belong to a pearling master,’ Horrie tells them in the morning. ‘You might find some interesting things.’

They eat breakfast and begin exploring.

‘Look!’ Julie opens a cupboard and claps her hands.

There are ship compasses, pearl boxes and tide charts. At the back of a dusty shelf Robin finds a pile of books. One is called *How to Speak Malay*. Another is a Japanese–English dictionary. She practises the strange words.

‘*Umi* means ocean. Fish is *sakana* ...’

‘Should we be speaking Japanese?’ Julie whispers. ‘Aren’t they the enemy?’

At the airport, Horrie had shown them bullet holes in his hangar doors from the 1942 air attack. Robin even poked her finger through one.

Julie tugs Robin’s shirt and repeats her question. ‘Are we allowed to speak Japanese?’

'I don't know.' Robin closes the dictionary. It's confusing. She knows that before the war, her dad had Japanese friends.

In the yard, the girls find bronze diving helmets and lead-soled boots hidden in the long grass. They're too heavy to lift so together Robin and Julie drag the pearl diving gear to the cubby they're making.

'You be the diver and I'll be the pearling boss,' Julie says.

They play for hours, sailing on imaginary luggers under the shade of a mango tree. A few days later, they explore the mudflats at low tide and discover *real* wrecks from the wartime air raids.

Climbing onto the beached luggers and pretending to be aviators on wrecked war planes keeps them entertained for ages. Robin sits in the rusty cockpits twirling dials and pushing mysterious buttons.

'All passengers prepare for crash landing,' she shouts as Julie's shrill voice squeals radio communication warnings to imaginary enemy pilots.

The war planes are only visible when the tide is out, so they have to time their games carefully.

Robin and Julie love Broome. They explore Chinatown, and skip along the narrow lanes with their close, two-storey buildings.

‘Smell the incense ...’ Robin sniffs the air as Julie peers into a window. Horrie warns them to stay away from the Chinese gambling houses. The sisters hear the click-clacking of mahjong tiles and try to imagine the rules of the strange game.

Living in the north-west is wonderful. The very, very best thing is flying with Horrie. He never tells them his plans, so Robin learns to watch for signs. One clue is changing from sandals into shoes and socks. When that happens, Robin calls Julie, ‘Quick, Dad’s going flying.’

They race out to the jeep and sit quietly as he drives to the airstrip where Horrie lets them climb aboard his trusty runaround, an Australian-designed Wackett plane.

Starting the Wackett involves a complex set of steps. Once the girls are strapped safely into the back seat, Horrie places chocks around the wheels, and plugs in an external battery. He gets into the cockpit to set the switches and controls, then jumps out and swings the propeller until the engine fires. Finally, he unplugs the battery, pulls away the chocks, and leaps back into the cockpit.

‘Righteo,’ he calls. ‘Who’s ready for take-off?’

‘Me!’ The girls grip their seat as they speed down the runway and lift into the sky.

Sometimes a hawk or sea eagle hovers alongside them.

Robin watches their feathers adjust to updrafts and turbulence and remembers Horrie's explanations as parrots flew above their gum trees back home.

There are cracks in the floorboards of the little plane, so Robin can also see the ocean below. Her dad, in his leather flying helmet, turns to point out a school of shark.

'Look at those beauties circling.'

Robin laughs and gives him a thumbs up. Her toes and fingers tingle with excitement. Robin feels free, and completely alive.

Horrie flies his girls to remote cattle stations. As he buzzes the homesteads before landing, Robin and Julie wave to the people below. When they see stray animals on the dusty airstrips, it's their job to shout, 'Get away.'

Between flying adventures, they're often at Broome Airport, meeting flights.

'Out of the way, girls,' Horrie shouts one morning. 'There's an RFDS flight coming in.'

'What's RFDS?' Julie asks.

'Royal Flying Doctor Service!' Robin says, scanning the sky.

A small aircraft touches down, then speeds along the airstrip towards a waiting ambulance. Horrie runs to help. A boy their age lies on a stretcher. The white bandage

around his head is soaked in blood. His eyes are wide and frightened.

‘Don’t worry, young fella,’ Horrie shades the boy’s face with his hat. ‘You’re in good hands.’

‘We’ll have you at the hospital in no time,’ the flight nurse adds.

‘What happened?’ Robin asks.

‘He came off his horse. It’s a deep gash. Lucky the doc was at a nearby homestead.’

Robin squeezes her sister’s hand. ‘Imagine working for the RFDS and saving lives!’



Before long, the girls know all the MacRobertson Miller pilots and air hostesses. They’re even allowed to tag along on ‘milk-run’ flights to a chain of outback stations. Those flights are in larger Lockheeds or Ansons. Everyone is keen to meet the aircraft crews and hear news of the outside world.

‘What’s happening in Broome?’ they ask the air crew, as they unload mail and freight.

Then they turn to the girls, ‘How’s your dad?’

‘He’s very busy,’ they reply.

Robin loves hearing the station gossip and being part of the friendly banter. The milk-run days are hot and dusty, but Robin feels at home in the vast north-west, with its wide skies and bottle-shaped boab trees. To pass the long flight time, the pilots tell Robin stories about women aviators, like Amelia Earhart and Amy Johnson. Imagining their daring solo flights makes the hours pass quickly.



Eventually it's time for the girls to return south.

'Why can't we stay?'

'Your mum misses you.'

'She could bring Patsy and the baby here ...'

Horrie ruffles Robin's hair. 'Cheer up, you'll be back for the holidays before you know it.'

BROOME TIME

*That lonely land with its enormous plains, and
majestic ranges deeply gorged by mysterious
rivers, it was the place where I most wanted to be.*

There are five Miller children in 1952 when Mary makes the thrilling decision to move the family to Broome for six months. Robin says goodbye to her school friends at Perth's Loreto Convent. She can't wait to get back to the north-west.

First, they need to tackle the ten-hour flight. The family wakes before dawn and heads to the airport. The three older girls take turns to help with their little brother, Andy, and Marie Rose, the youngest.

Their luggage is carefully weighed, and each passenger

has to step on the scales as well. The air smells of fuel, grease, and polish. Robin inhales the familiar smells as they walk towards the shadowy shape on the tarmac.

The DC3's back wheel is lower than the front two. They board towards the rear so it's an uphill scramble to find their seats. The hostess gives them pillows, blankets, and barley sugar to suck during take-off.

'So that your ears won't pop,' she says.

The engines rumble. Robin watches the propellers spin until they become a silvery blur. Then the DC3 taxis to the runway, lifts into the sky and heads north. Once they level into cruising altitude, Julie moves through the cabin.

'Hello,' she says to their fellow travellers. 'Are you enjoying the flight?'

Julie loves chatting to people and wants to be an air hostess when she leaves school.

Robin is more interested in visiting the pilots. Since the age of ten she's been able to run through the take-off and landing checklist like a pro. Now that she's twelve, she never misses anything.

'Hello, Robin!' the pilots call.

They let her sit in the jump-seat in the cockpit. Robin's fingertips tingle, wishing she could touch the controls.

Breakfast is served on a tin tray. Robin eats hers then

helps herself to Andy's meal. He's looking queasy. The DC3 is an unpressurised aircraft so they can't fly above 10,000 feet. If they hit turbulence, Robin knows they'll just have to clutch sick bags and fly through it.

Halfway to Carnarvon the landscape changes. The sand along the coast looks pinkish. Soon they'll see the red soil of the Kimberley.

Their plane is carrying the Royal Mail, so there are regular stop-offs along the way; Geraldton, Carnarvon, Onslow, Roebourne, Port Hedland ... At each stop the family get off to stretch their cramped legs. The plane also visits remote cattle stations where a single vehicle might be waiting for their supplies. Whenever the doors open, a waft of heat and flies stream in. The hostesses don't hold back with the flyspray.

After Port Hedland the sisters press their faces against the windows, scanning the sea for whales, and hoping to be the first one to glimpse the Broome peninsula. At last, they see the white sands of Cable Beach stretching out below in the twilight.

'There's the town!'

Kangaroos bound through the bush as the pilot lines up with the airstrip. Bump, clunk, the wheels touchdown on a strip of bitumen marked by white cones.

A man in shorts and long socks wheels out the aircraft steps. It's dusk and soft pastel colours fill the sky. They step into the heat and see Horrie waiting to greet them.

'G'day, g'day.'

Robin sighs happily as her skin warms in the tropical air.

Ten years have passed since the wartime bombings, but Broome still looks shellshocked. The once bustling town is a backwater with just a few rickety shops. Pearling luggers lie rotting in tidal creeks.

'Before the war,' Horrie tells them, 'there were hundreds of pearling ships. Now there's only about twenty.'

During the war, Japanese pearlers were taken away and locked up in internment camps. They still haven't returned. The divers working on the luggers now are mostly Malay.

Robin's family stay in Broome all through the dry season. It's the best six months ever.

Mary enrols the older children at the local school. There are two classrooms, one for the juniors and one for the seniors. The schoolyard is a rowdy contrast to their days at Loreto Convent.

Then, after school, the mangroves are an ever-changing playground for Robin and her siblings. Everything in Broome revolves around the enormous tides. The difference can be up to ten metres. When the tide's high,

they paddle in the shark-proof swimming enclosure, imagining tiger sharks and stingrays circling beyond the safety of the mesh.

Low tide is even more fun.

‘Let’s look for treasure,’ little Marie Rose begs her sisters.

The oozing mud sucks at their feet. Carrying buckets and levers to lift the rocks, they explore the mangroves and reefs that become exposed when the tide is drawn out to a blue line in the distance.

Marooned sea creatures hide in rockpools. Horrie makes friends with an octopus and feeds it oysters while it twines itself around his arm. The cephalopod is less trusting of children. If they come too close, it sprays black ink and speeds away.

‘See how it powers itself with pulse jet action,’ Horrie tells Robin. ‘Like the old doodlebug flying bombs in the war!’

Robin doesn’t know about pulse jets or doodlebugs, but she’s determined to learn.



The Broome peninsula is a haven for birds. Each year, tens of thousands of shorebirds arrive to feast in the rich mudflats.

‘They’ve flown all the way from China,’ Horrie tells Robin. ‘Some haven’t eaten for days.’

When it’s time for the birds to leave the Kimberley, they rise above the bay in a giant flock, arranging themselves into an aerodynamic V-shape.

‘Safe flight,’ she whispers as they fly north.

After each busy day of adventuring, Robin climbs under the mosquito net that covers her bed on the verandah. She stares at the night sky, looking for Sirius and the Southern Cross. Flying foxes jostle in the mango trees above, then spread their wings, soaring away on the nightly hunt for fruit and nectar.

Although they’ve changed towns, the Miller children still fall asleep to the sound of Mary typing.

Some evenings the family goes to the open-air Sun Picture Theatre with its strictly segregated seating. The parents of some of Robin’s school friends must sit on hard benches while her parents and the pearling masters lounge in comfortable deckchairs. When high tide creeps in, people in *all* sections of the theatre take off their shoes and cool their feet.

An incoming RFDS flight always adds excitement to the movies. As aircraft roar over the theatre, Robin remembers the boy who came off his horse, and imagines herself as a

flying doctor pilot. Zooming over the picture theatre on an emergency airlift would be amazing.

‘Maybe one day I’ll save someone’s life,’ she whispers.



In December, monsoonal clouds gather and the red poinciana flowers bloom.

‘The wet season is starting,’ Mary says. ‘It’s time to go back to Perth.’

The children groan.

Gran meets the family at Perth Airport. ‘Goodness me,’ she shakes her head. ‘What a bunch of ragamuffins!’

She gathers the children’s dusty Broome clothes and puts them all in the bin.