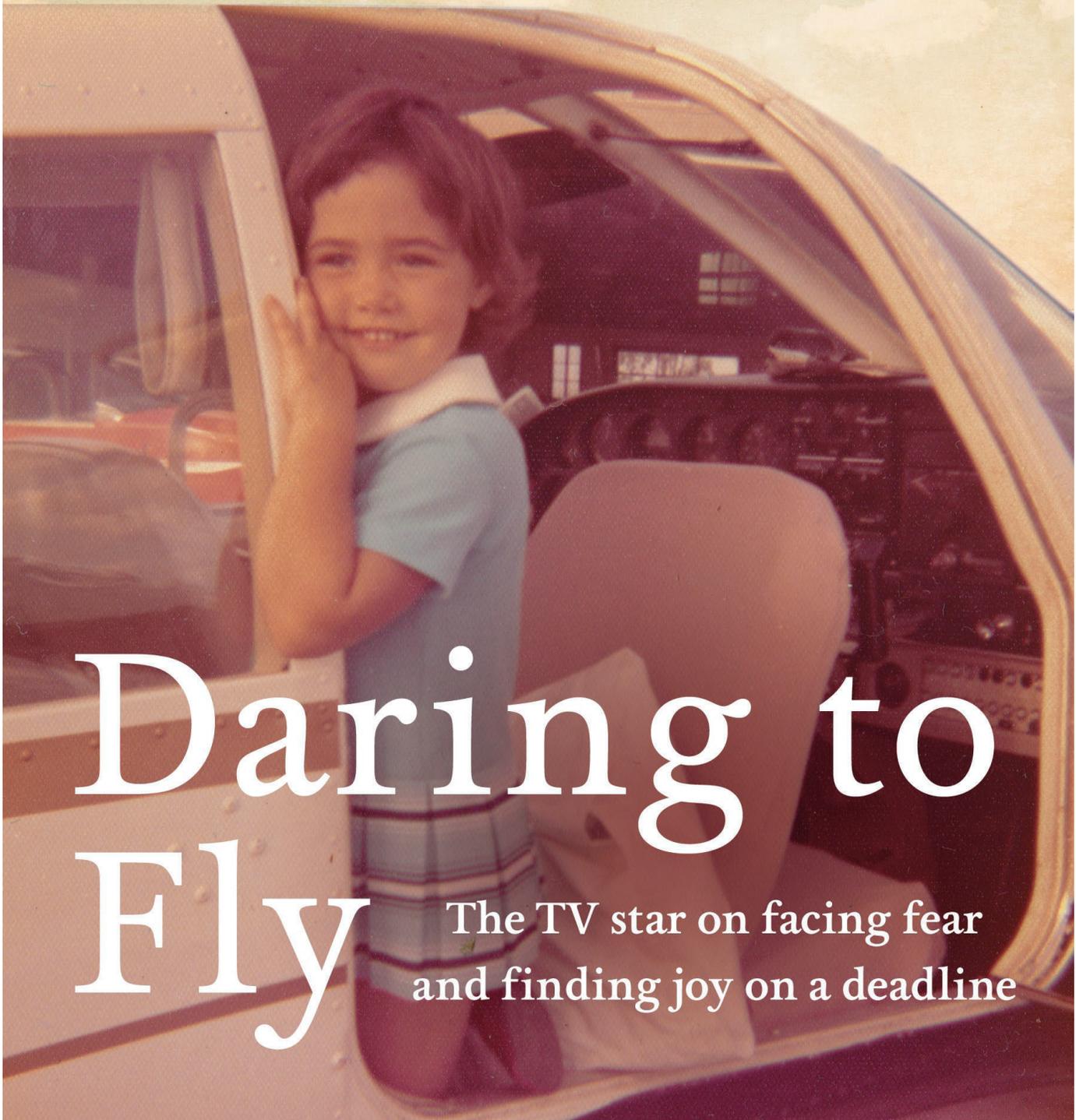


LISA MILLAR

'A country kid says yes to life . . . in a book full of heart, intelligence,
courage and compassion' LEIGH SALES



Daring to Fly

The TV star on facing fear
and finding joy on a deadline

LISA MILLAR is the co-host of ABC TV's *News Breakfast*. Millar returned to the ABC in Australia after finishing a decade-long posting as bureau chief in both Washington, DC and London covering some of the world's biggest stories. She began her career at *The Gympie Times* in 1988 and has worked in print, TV and radio. She won a Walkley Award in 2005 for investigative reporting.

LISA
MILLAR

Daring to

Fly The TV star on facing fear
and finding joy on a deadline

 hachette
AUSTRALIA



Published in Australia and New Zealand in 2021
by Hachette Australia
(an imprint of Hachette Australia Pty Limited)
Level 17, 207 Kent Street, Sydney NSW 2000
www.hachette.com.au

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Copyright © Lisa Millar 2021

This book is copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purposes of private study, research, criticism or review permitted under the *Copyright Act 1968*, no part may be stored or reproduced by any process without prior written permission. Enquiries should be made to the publisher.



A catalogue record for this
book is available from the
National Library of Australia

ISBN: 978 0 7336 4718 5

Cover design by Christabella Designs
Front cover images courtesy Millar family collection; Shutterstock
Back cover image by Will Belcher, Sheer Will Photography
Internal images courtesy Millar family collection; John Bean, Dan Sweetapple, Kim Landers,
Max Futcher, Cameron Bauer and Emily Smith; and Prince Harry image © WP#JRAK.
Typeset in Adobe Garamond Pro by Kirby Jones
Printed and bound in Australia by McPherson's Printing Group



The paper this book is printed on is certified against the Forest Stewardship Council® Standards. McPherson's Printing Group holds FSC® chain of custody certification SA-COC-005379. FSC® promotes environmentally responsible, socially beneficial and economically viable management of the world's forests.

*In memory of Clarrie and Dorothy Millar,
the best support crew a daughter could have*

PROLOGUE

WE SPOKE TWO languages in our family – English and aviation. Spot tests on the pilot’s phonetic alphabet could come at any time.

‘W?’ Dad would ask.

‘Whiskey!’ We’d call out in response.

‘D?’

‘Delta!’

We had our own small plane for nine years and it never crossed my mind that flying was anything but the most natural way to get from one place to another.

Then, in 1993 while I was the ABC’s North Queensland reporter, a six-seater plane we had chartered for work was caught in a heavy storm. While rain was lashing my window, there was a sudden loss of power and the motor on the left spluttered and died. The drop in altitude hit my gut so fast my brain couldn’t understand what was happening. The engine on the right revved like mad trying to keep us airborne.

DARING TO FLY

We made it safely to the ground but I was shaken by the experience.

After that, fear began stalking me. It was in the shadows initially, but it slowly became a constant, aggressive presence. It culminated when I was covering the Queensland election campaign in 1998 as the state political reporter. We were due to fly on a charter flight with the premier at the time, Rob Borbidge. I had been feeling sick about it all day. I drove towards the airport and the skin on my palms grew prickly.

Coffee and plain Arnott's biscuits were on offer when we arrived at the charter company's small office. There was always a wait as camera crews from different networks turned up and heavy camera gear was packed onboard.

I was starting to sweat and people's voices became indistinct, a hushed blur of noise. I went to the bathroom and wondered if vomiting would help spew out the torment I was feeling.

Finally the call came to load and leave. I put one foot in front of the other – there were only a few dozen steps from the small shed where we'd been waiting to the bottom of the plane steps.

'Come on, you can do it,' a colleague said.

Up the stairs, through the cabin door and just two more steps to my seat.

But I was physically incapacitated. I couldn't fold my legs or bend my knees to sit on the seat. I was locked with fear – every muscle in my body was spasming. I walked past my seat and lay on the floor at the rear of the twenty-seater plane.

PROLOGUE

Rob Borbidge bounded up the stairs and gave us a cheery 'G'day'. The pilot turned around to greet the premier and instead saw me, spread out on the floor. Borbidge knew I was a fearful flyer but the extent of it, on show for all to see, was news to him.

I wasn't humiliated. I didn't care. I was beyond caring about anything other than the fear.

CHAPTER 1

Finding a Course

THERE NEVER SEEMED to be a time when my family didn't talk about flying.

Dad had wanted to be an aviator in World War II but it wasn't until he was in his forties that he got his pilot's licence. My eldest brother, Robert, learned to fly small planes the year after I was born. My other brother, David, always the contrary one, preferred to jump out of them. My big sister, Wendy, gazed longingly from her bed at boarding school at the planes flying overhead and dreamed of being an international flight attendant.

They were almost grown-ups by the time my little sister, Trudi, and I were born. She was the happiest of passengers. And me? From the first take-off as a child, I simply loved being airborne.

DARING TO FLY

Whether it was the soothing sound of propellers on a small plane as they found their rhythm and synced their spinning blades, or the high-pitched whine of a Rolls-Royce engine on a jumbo jet before it surged into life and lifted its load higher and higher, flying was a joy.

I was always torn between the anticipation of an exotic destination and the desire to stay aloft forever. But it was Dad who really started the flying dream – it made him happy and no one would have begrudged Dad that happiness. His childhood had been anything but.

* * *

Dad was born in 1925, in Adelaide in an era of great confidence. The city was vibrant and trams vied for space on the boulevards with bicycles and a growing number of cars being churned out at the Holden factory.

Dad was named Percival Clarence, after his father, but he was always known as Clarrie. He adored his father who was a conductor and then driver on the trams. Dad and his siblings, older sister, Joan, and younger brother, John, would try to outrun each other to deliver their father's lunch at the tram terminus. If they were lucky and he was in good spirits, which he often was, he'd let them pull the cord and ring the bell.

They lived in a small brick home north of the city centre, a contented family with both sets of grandparents nearby. It was a happy childhood, but that didn't last long.

FINDING A COURSE

Deep in the back pages of the *Adelaide Advertiser* on 31 July 1935 was Percy's death notice. The 'dearly loved husband of Elsie Turbill and loving father of Joan, Clarence and John' had died at their Augusta Street home. There was a set rate for death notices if they were kept to a maximum of five lines but the family spent an extra sixpence to add the final detail – he was just thirty-four.

Anyone reading the paper that day wouldn't have had a clue about the heartache that had enveloped that Augusta Street home. Percival had suffered from tuberculosis, his lungs filling with blood, his wet hacking cough keeping the family awake at night with worry.

It was a painful and drawn-out way to die and his final gasping breath was taken in the arms of his wife. His children, waiting outside, heard her wail, 'Oh Daddy, oh Daddy,' and they knew he was gone.

For the rest of his life my father would recount the pain he and his siblings felt as they hovered on the other side of the door listening to their mother's grief.

Elsie, young and widowed with three children under twelve, decided she needed to find another husband. Things might have been different for the young family if she hadn't settled on a bloke named WD Millar – a 'gadabout' whose peripatetic approach to life had an immediate and distressing impact on the children.

WD met and romanced Elsie and then they packed up for Melbourne, leaving the children behind. Joan was placed with her paternal grandmother, a widow herself who was still grieving the loss of her son, and the boys went to stay with Elsie's friends. The unexpected stay lasted long enough that the children were told

they'd be sent to an orphanage if their mother didn't come and collect them.

When Elsie and WD did return, the newly formed family of five began a migratory existence of short stays in boarding houses and flats in country Victoria and Melbourne. One boarding house owner, doubting he'd ever be paid, took a box brownie camera from young Clarrie's hands and said, 'I'll hang onto that, sonny.' The camera had been a gift from Dad's grandparents, one of the only things he truly possessed and he was mortified.

The family all adopted WD's surname – Millar. But even that was surrounded with mystery and suspicion. WD and Elsie hadn't ever married – as far as anyone knew – and the spelling didn't make sense. He was a blood relation of Keith Miller, an Australian test cricketer who played with Sir Donald Bradman in the era of the Invincibles. But why did WD spell his surname with an 'a'? Dad thought he was probably adding another layer of subterfuge for the endless debtors trying to track him down.

The family was always on the move: in the space of three years the children had changed homes four times and schools three. By the time they reached the small town of Rosebery in north-west Tasmania, Clarrie was thirteen and picked out by the head teacher for a job lugging bags of ore to the ovens at the zinc and lead mine – the same place WD was working as a mechanic. They offered Clarrie ten shillings and sixpence a week – a fortune for a teenager. It was his birthday when he delivered the news to his mum that he was leaving school and offered to pay her five bob a week rent, half his salary. She burst into tears at her son's generosity.

FINDING A COURSE

It wasn't long before the family was on the move again, to Queenstown and then south to Hobart. Dad, who was now fourteen, and his twelve-year-old brother, John, were again separated from the family and put up at the Sailors' Rest at Salamanca down by the harbour for a while. As the name suggested, the four-storey narrow brick building, with a ship's anchor painted on the front, was a place for mariners to bunk down. Groups of men lounged on the wooden bench outside. It was not a place for children. Four years later it was closed down for good after being declared 'unfit for human habitation'.

In quick succession, courtesy of WD's inability to pay rent, the family moved from one home to another, ending up in a boarding house in South Hobart.

Clarrie began work at the Brownell Brothers department store on Liverpool Street. Despite his youth, he took the role seriously. He was a stickler for rules and not even his mum's familiar face changed his approach.

'Yes, Madam, how may I help you?' he greeted her one day.

His mother responded with a quizzical look.

An opportunity then came up for him to join the Postmaster-General's Department (now Australia Post) as a telegraph messenger. Two hundred sat the exam and thirteen were appointed. Clarrie was one of them. The job came with a sombre responsibility. The faraway battles of World War II were creeping closer and the messengers would pedal their bikes up and down the hilly streets of Hobart day and night, summer and winter, to deliver telegrams.

DARING TO FLY

The soldiers couldn't reveal much about their movements and the messages to their families were short and to the point, with military-approved phrases that at least let their loved ones know they were alive. But as the enemy advanced on Allied troops, families began dreading the sight of the young uniformed cyclists coming down their street.

When Clarrie knocked on people's doors, the words contained in the telegram would go through his mind – he knew them by heart: 'The Minister for the Army regrets to advise you that your husband/son has been killed/wounded in action.' Sometimes wives would collapse in a torrent of grief before he'd even got back on his bike, their wails reminding him of his mother's pain when his father had died in her arms.

There was no counselling for the families or for the young messengers like Clarrie whose duties weighed them down. They were another part of the collateral damage of war.

Despite what he witnessed, Dad was desperate to go to war and was worried it would end before he was old enough to enlist. He wanted to fly with the RAAF but his mother begged him not to. Even though he was eighteen and didn't need her permission, he couldn't break her heart. She'd suffered so much already.

Instead he was promoted to the operating room where morse code was translated into English for the telegrams. He then trained to become a radio operator at Shepparton in Victoria where he was taught to salute, bayonet the enemy and reverse-butt them in the face with the rifle.

It was the end of 1943 and the Allies in the Pacific were beating back the Japanese. General Douglas MacArthur seconded Australia's

FINDING A COURSE

best and brightest wireless operators to intercept the Japanese *katakana* messages and translate them into English. Dad was one of them and they were sworn to secrecy, operating out of the Northern Territory, north Queensland and Brisbane. MacArthur credited them with having shortened the course of the war by twelve months but the clandestine nature of their work meant they returned to civilian life with little celebration of what they had achieved.

It was only decades later when the then British prime minister, Gordon Brown, thanked the Australians for their work and bestowed on them war medals that those wireless operators felt they could speak publicly about their war efforts, despite Dad having shared some of his stories with us privately over the years.

Dad never let on if he was fearful at all during those war years. But his voice trembled when he talked about his mate Victor. Vic had initially trained with Dad at Shepparton and had gone on to do what Dad had desperately wanted to do – fly. The two of them were based in Darwin, Dad at the Central Bureau's intercept unit and Vic flying Spitfires.

On 15 August 1945, the day the Japanese surrendered, Dad rushed to relay the message to Vic but was told by the commanding officer that he was on a mission. Vic never came home. His plane was shot down just as the war was ending.

'Poor, bloody, Vic,' Dad would say, the pauses accentuating the emotion that slipped out of each word.

After the war, Dad returned to Sydney, where his mother and WD had taken over a small shop in the northern suburb of Wahroonga near the train line. His brother, John, was now working

DARING TO FLY

in a shoe shop and Dad began working in the telegraph branch of the GPO in Sydney. Before he returned to civilian life, Dad had tried to push for a promotion, sending letters asking for specific training opportunities. But he was knocked back. While his bosses described the 21-year-old as 'keen, conscientious and reliable' they noted he hadn't served overseas during the war and would have to wait his turn behind other veterans who had. Little did they know the extent of his wartime service.

At night Dad started trying to catch up on the schooling he'd left behind when he was thirteen, completing his high school certificate and concentrating on economics.

After the excitement of his role during the war, Dad's daily duties must have felt mundane. Each day he'd walk through the operations room, not realising there were a few female eyes following his path.

'Hey, that little blonde over there fancies you because she thinks you look like James Mason,' one of the women finally told Dad, pointing at my mum, Dorothy.

The English actor James Mason was one of the UK's biggest box office drawcards after the war.

Mum wasn't lacking in movie star qualities herself. Her skin was tanned from long hours spent at the beach, her figure trim and her hair neatly coiffed.

Dad took her to the pictures for their first date, although it wasn't a James Mason film. Maybe Dad didn't want to take the chance he wouldn't shape up in comparison. They saw *The Jolson Story* instead, a biographical film about the American singer and

FINDING A COURSE

comedian Al Jolson who starred in Hollywood's first talking picture, *The Jazz Singer*, two decades earlier.

It wasn't long before they were married, and a year and a half later had their first child, my eldest brother, Robert.

Mum and Dad were living with Mum's mother – Ida Cooper – in the leafy Sydney suburb of Pymble when they decided to head north to Queensland for a holiday. Dad's mother and WD had ended up in the centre of the state, a few kilometres out of Biloela, the largest town in the Banana Shire. They were living on a piece of land that Dad's brother, John, had started working.

If Mum and Dad thought they'd be driving through banana plantations on their way north they soon learned otherwise. The shire was named Banana after an old yellow-coloured bullock who'd been a favourite of local stockmen in the 1860s and became part of the area's folklore.

Mum and Dad ended up spending a few years in Biloela, building a basic home with John, a dairy shed and telegraph lines to get a phone installed for the half-dozen other properties along Valentine Plains Road.

Dad had been dragged from one place to another as a child but, even as an adult, when he was the decision-maker, permanence didn't come easily. Within five years Mum and Dad were on the move again, to Brisbane, where Dad worked in real estate.

But he hankered for the land and made a decision that would eventually lead to the realisation of his flying dream.