

Danger Zone: Miles Hilton-Barber

BY PETER CACKETT

"Life is either a daring adventure, or nothing at all"

– Helen Keller, deafblind American author, activist, and disability rights advocate

I have always had a thirst for adventure, even if it has been predominantly from the comfort of my armchair. Daydreaming in the downtime between outpatient clinics, on the commute to and from work or late at night on the sofa, I have thought about potential escapades, but most of the time they end up being added to an ever-increasing bucket list.

One person who has lived out his dreams is Miles Hilton-Barber. A world-renowned blind adventurer, Miles is one of the most widely sought-after motivational speakers on the world circuit. His achievements include being the first blind pilot to fly from London to Sydney in a microlight; the first blind aviator to break the sound barrier in a fighter jet; and the first blind person to man-haul a sledge across 400km of Antarctica. I was keen to find out more about his adventurous exploits and also to discover if he had any wisdom to impart for those wishing to live out their own dreams. We met virtually on a cold winter's morning in December 2024.

Miles grew up in Africa in the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland (now Zimbabwe). His father, Maurice, had a distinguished career as a pilot and served during World War II in the Royal Air Force, ultimately commanding Squadron 450 where he was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. After the war, his father became the Director of Civil Aviation in the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland. "So, as a little boy, I grew up wandering around civil aircraft and my great love was to be a pilot like my dad," Miles explained.

At school, Miles wore glasses but was otherwise not aware of any problems with his vision. When he was eighteen years old, he applied to join the Rhodesian Air Force. However, he failed the eyesight test and on that basis was rejected. He was not given any diagnosis at the time.

Following the disappointment of not being able to follow his dream of being a pilot, he went hitchhiking around the world with a friend. Around the age of 21, when he was travelling in Australia, he realised that his night vision was going. When driving he used to swerve suddenly if a parked vehicle pitched up quite close to the car. He also had an accident on his Honda 350 motorbike, colliding with a friend who was in a blind spot and coming off at around 35mph, fracturing his cheekbone. "I can remember flying through the air like Batman and below me my bike was skidding along the tarmac with sparks coming off the handlebars." His older brother, Geoff, was at university in Johannesburg and had been diagnosed with X-linked retinitis pigmentosa (RP) a few months earlier. His doctor suggested that Miles was checked for the condition as well.

Miles returned to Rhodesia and was also diagnosed with RP. He was told that he would gradually lose his vision and ultimately become blind but had no support at all. "To be honest, I was bewildered. I thought my quality of life was going to go out the window and decided the best thing was to forget about it and leave it as tomorrow's problem. Looking back, the big disappointment is that I didn't have any counselling or advice to know what to do about it."

With this devastating news and after being dropped by his girlfriend, his brother advised him to take up skydiving. "He said



Miles' Antarctica expedition.

skydiving would frighten me so much that I would forget about my girlfriend. Just before exiting the aircraft, I could never see which way the windsock was going, so I always made sure someone else did the guiding in because I had no idea where I needed to be. The only way to see my altimeter on my wrist whilst free-falling was to hold it right up to my eyes and figure it out."

In Rhodesia and subsequently Zimbabwe, Miles worked as a pharmaceutical representative. But in the early 1980s conditions started to deteriorate under President Mugabe, in particular with regards to children's schooling. Miles and his family therefore decided to emigrate to Britain, ultimately settling in Derbyshire. He started working for the Royal National Institute of Blind People, initially as an employment consultant helping assess other people losing their sight and subsequently as their motivational development manager.

This was an important event for Miles as it was the first time in his life that he had come into contact with other blind people. He began playing the game goalball, "which is a brilliant sport. My friends and I won national competitions with Derbyshire and I almost got into the Paralympic team. But it was only then that I met other blind people who used a white stick or a guide dog and they seemed happy. I discovered, there's accountants, there's judges, there's computer programmers who are blind. I suddenly thought, goodness me, there's still a possibility to do things, let's see what other blind people can do."

Miles then started looking at other athletic events for blind people. The limit of what he thought he could achieve in life was gauged by what other blind people could do, and by seeing if he was able to accomplish the same. However, he still had a victim mentality and was unhappy with his lot in life. When he was aged fifty, another major turning point would change the course of Miles' life...

His brother Geoff, who by that time was also blind, was living in Durban, South Africa. He was a keen sailor and had done some visually impaired sailing and crewed teams in yacht races. He built a yacht in his back garden largely by feel. "He launched it and it didn't sink! He then said that he would sail the yacht from Durban in Africa to Freemantle in Australia via the Indian Ocean, totally blind,

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Climbing Mont Blanc.



Climbing Mount Kilimanjaro.



Diving in Hurghada, Red Sea.



Ice climbing in Scotland.



In Hawker Hunter fighter aircraft.



On yardarm of yacht (fear of heights).

totally alone, using speech output on his primitive navigational instruments. Everyone told him that he was stupid and it was impossible for a blind man to cross an ocean solo." At the time, his brother replied by saying, "It's not impossible, it's just never been done before."

In 51 days, Geoff reached Australia, spending five days in a force-10 gale, nearly drowning in massive waves, and being blown off course towards Antarctica. It's still a world record and no blind person has sailed across an ocean solo since.

This was Miles' big wake-up call. It taught him for the first time that the key to success in life is not our external circumstances, but our inner response to them – "attitude is what determines altitude!" Miles then quoted a Danish proverb, "Life does not consist in holding a good hand, but in playing a poor hand well." Geoff was playing his hand of cards. I wasn't."

Geoff turned Miles' life around. "He said to me, 'Miles, the trouble with you is that you're focussing on your blindness. What can a blind man do? I'll tell you what you can do. Shut up about your blindness. Stop going on about it. Start with your dreams and not your circumstances!' I took his advice and started living my life thinking about my dreams and my goals and not focusing on my blindness. I thought, well my dream is that I want to be a pilot so I will be a pilot. If my brother can sail to Australia using his ears, then I am going to fly using my ears."

Miles explained his philosophy in life, which is "dream, decide, plan, persevere." So, Miles' dream was that he wanted to be a pilot. "The question which I had was, how can a blind person fly if he can't see? I realised that it would be possible if I had all the information from my flight instruments passed into my headphones. My eyes don't work but my ears do. In those days there was no speech output on any flight instruments. It took several years for an amazing guy to convert the output of all my flight instruments into speech, so that when I was flying, I had angle of bank, altitude, track, airspeed, ground speed and all my waypoints, etc. coming into my headphones. I had a set of switches attached with Velcro to the leg of my flying suit to select whatever data I needed at any time to fly the microlight. It is a lovely, primitive and easy way to fly."

This was the first time that the technology was available, enabling Miles to have the freedom and exhilaration to be at the controls, navigating and flying his microlight, but he still needed a sighted co-pilot to accompany him. His next dream was that he wanted to fly a microlight from London to Sydney. He trained for this project for four years with a sighted co-pilot.

Unfortunately, the day before they were set to start their world-record flight, his sighted co-pilot announced he would not be coming after all, leaving Miles with the last-minute task of finding an alternative microlight pilot willing to undertake this massive flight with him – due to leave the next day! Within an hour on the phone that evening, Miles managed to locate two microlight pilots who agreed to alternatively share the flight with him, departing just two days later, despite the complex re-arrangements necessary.

"The 55-day flight was an awesome adventure, including surviving two extreme storms en route. On one occasion, we were flying inland over Malaysia and ended up in a massive thunderstorm. The monsoon type rain was hitting us hard. It was like flying through a grey mist and we couldn't see anything really, narrowly missing a rocky peninsula. We eventually made it to Kuala Lumpur with pools of water from our laps dropping on to the tarmac and steaming in the 40-degree heat. We should have carried on to Singapore after refuelling that afternoon but stayed in Kuala Lumpur and had a few beers to celebrate the fact that we were still alive.

"Our longest flight was an epic 9.5 hour flight from Indonesia to Australia over the Timor Sea. Loaded with nearly four times our usual maximum fuel load we needed to divert to Western Australia due to strong head winds to reach the nearest land and avoid a watery end to our flight! Flying from Darwin over the Northern Territory we again ran short of fuel due to more headwinds. My co-pilot spotted a small pub with a fuel station below us and we managed to land on the country road used by cattle trucks to refuel. If you land a plane on a road here in England they put you in prison. If you do it in Australia, they give you a beer." The journey from London to Sydney took 55 days, crossing 21 countries and covering 21,000km, flying at an average speed of 70mph.

Following on from this, Miles wanted to be the first blind aviator to break the sound barrier. He achieved this in an English Electric Lightning fighter jet at a place called Thunder City in Cape Town, South Africa, reaching a speed of Mach 1.4/1060mph during a vertical climb to 50,000 feet in just 90 seconds. "That's the equivalent of flying over five football fields a second in level flight!"

Miles did have some trepidation beforehand. "I have struggled with claustrophobia all my life. I'm also afraid of heights, which is a bit strange with me having flown my microlight at over 20,000 feet and being able to dangle my leg outside the microlight to get rid of cramp! When I was actually sitting in the very confined cockpit of this jet, strapped in with a five-point harness, I was becoming very claustrophobic. In my head I was thinking, 'you idiot Miles, you've

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Pulling Sledge Antarctica.



Sahara Desert Ultra-Marathon.



Speaking at Million Dollar Global Round Table Conference.



With English Electric Lightning fighter aircraft.



With Microlight, thumbs up.



With Microlight.

come all the way from London to Cape Town to go supersonic and now you want to leave. It's pathetic.' I managed to stop panicking, telling myself that fear stands for 'False Evidence Appearing Real.' This is something I was told when I was learning to scuba dive and I was experiencing panic attacks. Breaking the sound barrier was an incredible experience. As you approach the sound barrier there is a very slight rumble and once you are through the plane becomes even smoother. The lightning is an easy, gentle and beautiful aircraft to fly."

Miles considers that one of his biggest achievements is diving a wreck one-hundred feet down in the Red Sea. It was a large wreck and he got his buddy to take him into the small wheelhouse space. "My claustrophobia was starting to rise. I could hear the bubbling echo around me in this enclosed space. I was starting to hyperventilate and have a panic attack. My buddy was signalling, 'do you want to get out?' I signalled, 'no.' I just took myself through it and said to myself, 'look, you can breathe, slow down.' I spent minutes just calming myself down. For me, that was my biggest achievement as a blind person, overcoming that irrational fear. The biggest barriers you will have to overcome in life are the ones that you have built in your own head."

I wanted to know if Miles has a different assessment of risk to the average person. "Many people think I must have been a really adventurous outgoing person all my life but I wasn't. When I was growing up, I was small and skinny and had a low self-confidence. I had no expectations of doing anything significant with my life. Blindness was the best thing that could have happened to me as I had to learn things and kind of take risks. When I went to Antarctica, people said I was being totally irresponsible as I had never even skied on snow before. How could I be led by my guide's voice when the high Katabatic winds were blowing so hard that I could not hear him? I said, 'hey, no blind person has attempted this before, and we will work it out at the time.' As they say in the army, the best plans do not last beyond first contact with the enemy! Sure, I fell over a few times trying to cross blue ice patches but I soon figured it out, and of course there was nobody to laugh at me in that beautiful wilderness, apart from my guide and two others, also battling with the extreme conditions. On all my expeditions I have always made sure that I have had the most experienced people to help me."

Miles has another philosophy which he abides by which is the circle of life. "Draw an imaginary circle around yourself. This represents everything you have done with your life to date. You need to get into the routine of stepping outside your circle,

attempting things that you have never done before. Every time you do something new, your circle grows bigger and reforms around you, giving you more confidence each time for the next event. If an elderly lady who's blind can bake a cake on her own and invite her neighbour to come over for tea for the first time, in her experience, that is as great an achievement as me heading to the South Pole. Anything you've never done before, you do it, and it helps you to grow and build your confidence. It's one step at a time. I say to people, 'When was the last time you did something for the first time? Because that was the last time you grew as a person!'

Miles has competed in many athletic events around the world which include the Siberian Ice Marathon; the 'Hottest Ultra-marathon on Earth' across Death Valley, California; the Marathon Des Sables 'Toughest Footrace on Earth' across the Sahara; and an 11-day ultra-marathon across China from the Gobi Desert to the Great Wall. Whilst participating in the Marathon Des Sables, Miles' sighted guide, Jon, read out a legend embroidered on the rucksack of a French runner which said, 'He who is not willing to risk going beyond his limits should not complain about the mediocrity of his existence.' "That really hit me," Miles said. "If you keep doing what you have always done, you will get what you have always got. All of us have been given two lives and we begin the second one the day we realise we've only got one. So, if you've got a bucket list, you've got to start doing it now. It's back to the strategy of dream, decide, plan, persevere."

Miles also has advice for ophthalmologists dealing with patients that are losing their vision. "The important thing to say to people who experience sight loss is that it's not the end of the world. It's different, but your quality of life need not go down. Point them in the right direction. There are so many good associations for the blind around the country. The sooner they learn new independent living skills the quicker they can start living a new and fulfilling life. I owe so much to the RNIB and social services in England. The quality of my life has gone through the roof since I went blind. I'm much happier and more fulfilled now as a blind person. At some level, I'm sorry that I can't look into the eyes of my wife or my children or my grandchildren, but I have learnt to let go of these things. There is a prayer by Dr Reinhold Niebuhr which says, 'God grant me the serenity to accept the things in my life that I cannot change, the courage to change those that I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.'

I asked Miles if I could wave a magic wand and he could see again whether he would accept it. "The answer is no, if it would

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mean me not having had the life that I've had. It may sound stupid but I'm very happy with what's happened to me. I've lost my sight, but I've had more fun. I would have probably had a fairly mediocre life if I hadn't gone blind. As a sighted person, there's very few things that no one's ever done, but as a blind person there's still loads of challenges out there. But if I could have my sight back again now... I would love it just for the joy of seeing my grandchildren, who I've never seen."

Although Miles imparted a great deal of wisdom during the interview, I asked him if he has one piece of advice for life. "There is one basic thing and that is the only limits in your life are those you choose to accept yourself. Dream big to achieve big. If you aim at the Moon, you may fail to reach it, but you're still amongst the stars. Don't be afraid of big goals. Stick to the strategy of dream, decide, plan, persevere. That has kept me in good stead all my life. Remember that an extraordinary person is just an ordinary person like you who decided to do something extra in their life. Also, remember to count your blessings."

Miles was much happier after he faced up to his blindness which turned his life around. He has also learnt that happiness isn't having what you want but wanting what you have. "I've learned the secret of contentment, which is to not to want things that you can't have. If we appreciate what we've got and realise how much we have, all of us would be so much happier."

Towards the end of the interview, we return to one of his previous adventures when he was attempting with three others to set a world record by crossing 200 kilometres of the Qatar Desert non-stop and unsupported. For this challenge they would not be stopping to sleep until they had reached the other side, and would be self-sufficient, dragging more than a third of a ton of water and supplies behind them through deep sand with temperatures of up to 40°C and high humidity. As they were setting off, Major Jay Turner of the Royal Engineers turned to him and quoted the poet T.E. Elliot: "Only he who is willing to risk going too far will discover how far it is possible to go."

As we rounded off our discussions, I wished Miles all the best for his future plans, which include sea kayaking as he has the

technology to be on his own, get out to sea and find his own way back. If the opportunity arose, he would also like to compete in the Microlight Tour De France. I asked Miles if there is a song that would headline the Spotify playlist of his life. With his love of speed and flying, he said that it would have to be *Danger Zone* from the movie *Top Gun*, which he loves.

For Miles' final thoughts, he said: "The biggest regret at the end of my life will be the things that I haven't tried, not the things that I have failed at. Look, life is a gift, get out there and live it and remember, there is something worse than failing, and that is failing to try!" With that we said our goodbyes and I headed off to my outpatient clinic, reflecting on Miles' words from earlier in the conversation: "If a blind man can have the privilege of being at the controls of a supersonic fighter, then you can do anything you want with your own life." Now where did I leave my bucket list?

RECOMMENDED VIEWING

- Miles Hilton-Barber's TED talk, 'A Blind Adventurer's Outlook on Life': <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=McRBFF09yIU>
- <https://www.mileshilton-barber.com/>

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