The Day the Stars Fell From the Sky  
The Story of the Oliviers Unplanned 1946 Visit to Eastern Connecticut

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| https://web.archive.org/web/20030516205006im_/http:/www.threadcity.com/articles/olivier/images/spacer.gifWillimantic has been visited by a number of interesting celebrities over the years. For example, President Ulysses S. Grant came in 1880 to look at the Willimantic Linen Company's innovative electric lighting, and Theodore Roosevelt came on a whistle-stop electioneering visit in 1904.  https://web.archive.org/web/20030516205006im_/http:/www.threadcity.com/articles/olivier/images/spacer.gifHowever, no visit to this quiet corner of eastern Connecticut gained as much attention as the unexpected arrival of Laurence Olivier and Vivian Leigh aboard the London-bound Pan Am Constellation transport, Clipper America, which crash-landed at Windham Airport in June 1946. This is the story of the dramatic events that occurred in Willimantic on a quiet summer's evening shortly after the end of World War Two.   |  |  | | --- | --- | | |  | | --- | | [Laurence Olivier after his crash at Windham Airport](javascript:popup('larry')) |   A composed, unruffled Laurence Olivier pictured by a Willimantic Chronicle photographer just minutes after the dramatic crash landing at Windham Airport. |   https://web.archive.org/web/20030516205006im_/http:/www.threadcity.com/articles/olivier/images/spacer.gifTransatlantic air travel was still in its infancy in 1946. The first commercial transatlantic flights began in 1939 but were discontinued during the War. Twenty years earlier, two Englishmen, Alcock & Brown, became the first people to fly across the Atlantic, non-stop from Newfoundland to Ireland. Those 1,930 miles were negotiated in 16 hours 12 minutes, and air travel would soon replace the four-day shipboard journey to Europe and cross-country treks by trains and automobiles. | https://web.archive.org/web/20030516205006im_/http:/www.threadcity.com/articles/olivier/images/spacer.gifIn the postwar period the United States and Britain vied with each other to provide the most profitable services for the lucrative transatlantic trade. Both countries converted wartime bombers and transports for the peacetime task of transporting people instead of high explosives and war materiel.  https://web.archive.org/web/20030516205006im_/http:/www.threadcity.com/articles/olivier/images/spacer.gifLaurence Olivier and Vivian Leigh need little introduction. Olivier was one of the world's outstanding actors. He starred on stage in London and on Broadway, and won several Oscars for his movie work. He was also a stage and film director and producer and became famous worldwide for masterly interpretations of Shakespeare's classics. American audiences better knew him for his work in film. Olivier played Heathcliff in William Wyler’s 1939 film version of Bronte's Wuthering Heights, and Maxim De Winter in David O. Selznick's 1940 classic Rebecca.  https://web.archive.org/web/20030516205006im_/http:/www.threadcity.com/articles/olivier/images/spacer.gifOlivier was largely known as the actor responsible for taking Shakespeare back to the masses after he joined London’s Old Vic Theatre Company in 1937. This famous British Repertory Company was disbanded during the war, but it reformed in late 1944.  https://web.archive.org/web/20030516205006im_/http:/www.threadcity.com/articles/olivier/images/spacer.gifIn the spring of 1946 the Old Vic was engaged to play New York City for six weeks, and Olivier was the star attraction. Broadway was inundated with more than 10,000 mail applications for tickets for his performances. Olivier did not disappoint and wowed the critics and audiences with his brilliant portrayals of Hotspur in Shakespeare's Henry IV, of Dr. Astov in Chekov's Uncle Vanya, and of Oedipus in W. B. Yeat’s version of Sophocles. He was voted Best Actor by Variety for the 1945/46 Broadway season. |  |

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| Vivien Leigh was an accomplished British actress long before she became famous as Scarlett O'Hara in Selznick's 1939 epic *Gone With the Wind*. She married Olivier in 1940. Four years later Leigh starred in one of her husband's productions, Thornton Wilder's *Skin of Our Teeth* on the London stage. Soon after she had an emotional breakdown and retired to Buckinghamshire to recuperate. In 1944 Leigh starred as Cleopatra in Gabriel Pascal's movie, *Caesar & Cleopatra*, a British film released in the United States in 1946. In that same year she accompanied her husband during his smash hit successes with the Old Vic on Broadway.  The New York run ended in June, and Leigh traveled with her husband to La Guardia airport on the afternoon of June 18, for the journey home to England where she would resume her role on the London Stage in *Skin of Our Teeth*.   |  |  | | --- | --- | | |  | | --- | | [Vivien Leigh relaxes after her plane crash](javascript:popup('vivien')) |   Vivien Leigh, the famed actress who played the immortal role of Scarlett O'Hara in the 1939 movie Gone With the Wind, relaxes in the grass at Windham Airport after surviving uninjured from the Constellation air liner's crash landing. |   The Pan Am *Clipper America*, upon which Olivier, Leigh and 44 other passengers embarked, was commanded by Captain Samuel H. Miller, an experienced flier with over a million air miles behind him. The plane left La Guardia at 5 p.m. and was heading northeastward over Connecticut, about 5,000 feet in the air, when Miller noticed that the plane’s extreme right engine had burst to flames. The engine mountings were badly damaged and the burning engine fell from the wing, and landed on a farm on Blackhill Road in Plainfield, fortunately causing no damage or injury. | Miller turned the plane around in an attempt to reach the Brainerd Field airport in Hartford, but he was losing height rapidly. He spotted a small airport below and decided to land there. It was Windham airport. Because the landing gear was damaged, Miller skillfully belly-landed the plane on Windham's 4,500-foot runway.  The frightened passengers heard the fuselage cracking and saw flames and smoke coming from one of the engines. They burst into applause as the craft skidded safely to a halt. Arthur Kuhn, the manager of the airport, saw the crash landing and told reporters that he had never seen anything comparable to Captain Miller's perfect maneuvering in stopping the massive plane in less than 3,000 feet.  The Constellation landed at 6:10 p.m. It was met by a fleet of ambulances and 60 state troopers, who had been alerted to an imminent crash at Windham by the control tower at Brainerd Field. The passengers calmly climbed from the stricken plane and assembled at the nose of the aircraft. Olivier told the locals that this had been his closest escape, including wartime experiences when he served in the Royal Air Force. He believed that all the passengers owed their lives to Captain Miller, who had done a brilliant job in landing the crippled “Connie.”  Vivian Leigh told reporters that she became really frightened when she saw the burning engine falling from the plane. Leigh also admitted that she greatly disliked flying, preferring sea and rail travel, but the couple's time was short and her husband needed a brief holiday after the tremendous amount of hard work he had put in during the Old Vic’s six week Broadway stint, and before his work on *Skin of Our Teeth*.  In no time, two buses arrived at the airport and ferried the crew and passengers to Hartford, where crowds four deep lined the walls of the Brainerd airport restaurant to watch Olivier and Leigh dine upon creamed chicken and mushrooms. More than 1,000 people watched as the two stars boarded the replacement plane for the first leg of the resumed trip to Gander, Newfoundland, Ireland and then England. |  |

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| Meanwhile, back at Windham, the airport was hosting a stream of aeronautic VIPs. First upon the scene was a representative from the Connecticut Department of Aeronautics. A team from the Federal Civil Aeronautics Authority (CAA) joined him, and separate inquiries into the near disaster were soon under way. Two federal customs officials also arrived and recovered some top-secret parcels from Clipper America's hold. No details of their contents were revealed. Pan American Airway officials arrived and hired local veteran soldiers to guard the plane from sightseers. The airline officials decided that the plane should be repaired at Windham Airport, and then flown back to La Guardia, as it was judged that the 4,500-foot runway was sufficient for a Constellation to take off from. The day after the crash over 3,000 people visited Windham Airport to catch sight of the gigantic airliner, valued at more than $1 million.  When local curiosity had subsided, work got under way to repair the stricken giant. It was raised for repairs by massive pneumatic bags inflated by a portable compressor. It was soon discovered that the fire had begun in an engine drive shaft that powered the Constellation's pressurized cabin system. The CAA ordered that these pressurized systems be disconnected pending the investigation, so Constellations had to temporarily fly at lower altitudes. The shafts were eventually replaced by a new drive system.   |  |  | | --- | --- | | |  | | --- | |  |   The stricken Constellation airliner lays damaged at Windham Airport several days after the crash. Aeronautic engineers ponder how best to repair the giant passenger aircraft, an ex-World War Two bomber. |   Two of weeks later, New England celebrated the 25th anniversary of the U.S. airmail service, and Windham's postmaster suggested that he be allowed to design a special postal seal and postmark. He planned to include pictures of the Constellation and Captain Miller, and wording celebrating the "special flight from Willimantic to New York of the Pan American World Airways transport Clipper America in recognition of the safe landing at Willimantic airport and skillful handling by pilot and crew, Crash landed June 18, 1946; Repaired and took off from Willimantic airport (date of postmark)." | Many applications were received, but the plan was abandoned when federal permission was refused, as it was not "policy to make historical record of airships which meet with difficulty in flight."   |  |  | | --- | --- | | |  | | --- | | [The damaged 'Clipper America' is photographed at Windham Airport](javascript:popup('planeview3')) |   The damaged 'Clipper America' is photographed at Windham Airport, looking southeastwards, two days after the June 20, 1946 crash landing. |   Modifications were made to the Constellation and the CAA lifted its ban, which allowed the newly repaired Clipper America to take off from Windham Airport at 4:30 p.m. on July 25, 1946. The go-ahead for the flight was given after persistent cloudy weather had cleared. The flight crew was staying at the Nathan Hale Hotel, and a phone call alerted them that conditions had improved. The take off attracted another large crowd who watched in awe as the giant plane lifted into the air, using only 2,000 feet of the runway.  The adventure was over. Life in Willimantic returned to normal. The Boston Red Sox had lost 1-0 at St. Louis, but the Hartford Chiefs had beat Elmira Pioneers 5-1. Willimantic moviegoers could see Roy Rogers, Dale Evans and George 'Gabby" Hayes in Rainbow Over Texas at the Gem Theater on Main Street.  Olivier and Leigh went on to achieve further greatness. After an outstanding career, Olivier died on July 11, 1989, aged 81. He had been knighted in 1970. Lord Olivier became known as “Sir Larry.” Leigh went on to win an 0scar for her portray of Blanche du Bois in a Streetcar Named Desire (1951). She died in 1967.  Willimantic almost had a visit from another VIP. Future British Prime Minister Sir Anthony Eden cancelled his reservation on the ill-fated Constellation a couple of hours before the departure from LaGuardia. Nevertheless, 1946 will always he remembered as the year when Heathcliff and Scarlett 0'Hara came to Willimantic.   |  | | --- | | [The damaged 'Clipper America' is photographed at Windham Airport](javascript:popup('planeview3')) |   The damaged 'Clipper America' is photographed at Windham Airport, looking southeastwards, two days after the June 20, 1946 crash landing. |  |

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| I recently interviewed Captain Samuel Hudson Miller, the pilot of the plane. Here is his version of the dramatic events at Windham Airport in 1946. Samuel Hudson Miller was born February 8, 1917 at Carlisle, Indiana, the first of four children, the son of a Methodist Minister. He now lives in retirement at Bloomington, Indiana. Sam Miller started flying as a cadet in 1937, inspired by the feats of his close friend, Charles Lindbergh. Millerâs flying instructor was the World War Two ace [Robert L. Scott](https://web.archive.org/web/20030516204222/http:/www.af.mil/news/May1998/n19980506_980611.html), the author of the best-selling book, "God Is My Copilot" about his experiences in wartime China with the [Flying Tigers](https://web.archive.org/web/20030516204222/http:/www.flyingtigersavg.com/). Miller trained at [Randolph Field](https://web.archive.org/web/20030516204222/http:/www.aetc.randolph.af.mil/ho/rafbtour/rafbtour.htm), the famous West Point of the Air, at San Antonio Texas. He was commissioned in 1939 and went on to fly Catalina Flying Boat transports across the Pacific during WWII. He also flew transports to North Africa and India. After the war he was a pioneer pilot in passenger transport, and helped to set the standards for weather, navigation, communications, airport approaches, sustaining English as the major aeronautic language, and the development of lighting for runways. He particularly recalled flying into London's pea-souper fogs on the 1950s.   |  |  | | --- | --- | | |  | | --- | |  |   The stricken Constellation airliner lays damaged at Windham Airport several days after the crash. Aeronautic engineers ponder how best to repair the giant passenger aircraft, an ex-World War Two bomber. |   Samuel Miller became the chief pilot at Pan Am and flew the airline's first jet flight across the Atlantic in 1958, where another famous actor, Greer Garson, was a passenger. He proudly recalls that there were nine dozen ages in the galley on that flight, and not one was broken. | Miller has never returned to eastern Connecticut but he fondly remembers Windham Airport. It had no tower, and had been de-commissioned, and was used as a navy training facility but it had a long runway. Everyone at Windham Airport was so courteous and helpful -- except for the packs of newsmen who swarmed around the crash-landed plane  Miller has vivid memories of the crash-landing at Windham Airport. He had first flown the Constellation in a test flight in August 1945, and for ten months after that with no problems. The fire in the engine caused the hydraulic lines to fail, and he had to call on all his skill and experience to land the aircraft. Miller recalled that during the crisis in the skies above Windham, Laurence Olivier thought it was the end, and was reciting verses from Romeo and Juliet as the plane maneuvered to crash land. Miller and Olivier became acquainted after the Windham crash, and Olivier invited him as a guest to any of his future performances.   |  |  | | --- | --- | | |  | | --- | | [The damaged 'Clipper America' is photographed at Windham Airport](javascript:popup('planeview3')) |   The damaged 'Clipper America' is photographed at Windham Airport, looking southeastwards, two days after the June 20, 1946 crash landing. |   The two met again in 1948 when Miller flew Olivier in a Boeing Stratocruiser to the United Nations, where Olivier was to read the preamble to the Declaration of Human Rights. The famous actor came into the cockpit, and practiced the preamble to MilleThe stricken Constellation airliner lays damaged at Windham Airport several days after the crash |  |