



# WARBIRDS IN THE CLOAK OF DARKNESS

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Published by Hellgate Press  
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Hellgate Press  
PO Box 3531  
Ashland, OR 97520  
*email:* info@hellgatepress.com

*Cover & Interior Design:* L. Redding

*Cataloging In Publication Data is available from the publisher upon request.*

*ISBN: 978-1-55571-921-0 (paperback)*

*ISBN: 978-1-55571-922-7 (ebook)*

Printed and bound in the United States of America

First edition 10 9 8 7 6 5 4

*This book is dedicated to Robert Eugene Holmstrom and his family, to Eleanor and Louis J. Fabian...and to Janice and Randy Wallake; Derek and Barb Olson; Erika, Brian, Wyatt, and Lane Kneen; Karen Silverwood; Ragan; and Jack for their support.*



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# Acknowledgments

**M**UCH CREDIT IS DUE TO Janice Wallake, without whose encouragement this story would never have been told. It was she who met Paul Grams, whose father John Grams lead me to Robert Eugene Holmstrom. As always, it was Jan who supported me every step of the way in producing this book. And my deep appreciation goes to her daughter Ragan Wallake, for the gift of a laptop computer that was invaluable for my remote access to the developing manuscript in creating this book.

A good deal of credit must also be given to Robert Holmstrom's devoted daughter, Jennifer Nelson. She supplied several DVDs, a wealth of information regarding the Carpetbaggers, and all of the original photographs portrayed in this book.

Valuable assistance was provided by the Lakes Public Library in Fort Myers, Florida. Thanks to Manager Jill Horom and the entire reference staff for help in the use of their wonderful facility.

A debt of gratitude is owed to Kylie, Carlos, and Vincent from Microsoft, and to Dustin Miller from Tech Bytes in Eveleth, Minnesota, for their invaluable technical assistance.

Finally, my heartfelt thanks to Harley Patrick at Hellgate Press for his wisdom, advice, and infinite patience, and to the staff who helped to create and publish this book.





# Author's Note

THE PRIMARY INSPIRATION FOR ME IN writing this book was the pride and joy I have experienced since my first book, *The Man Who Fell to Earth* was published in 2016. Friends and family of Robert Givens, the World War II veteran whose incredible story made that book a success, have expressed a deep appreciation for the experience of reading it, and the honor it has brought to Bob Givens. I was able to read the manuscript to Bob before he passed away. He was thrilled to know that his life story was being preserved for his family and for posterity.

A year later, I learned of another World War II veteran who had a unique experience during the war, unlike most others. He was part of a highly-classified group of flyers who had been carefully selected to perform extremely dangerous missions. They were sworn to secrecy during the war while performing these missions and for an additional forty years after the war ended.

Once more it's another "Bob." This man is Robert Holmstrom, and this amazing story has long been a secret. I was thus compelled to create this book and lift the veil of secrecy that surrounded the truth of what some of our young men were doing to preserve our freedom and that of many other countries as well. While more than forty years have passed since the end of World War II, most of the men involved in these covert operations have remained silent about their involvement, even though it has been declassified. Few of them are alive today, and few people have any knowledge of their part in the heroic missions that saved many lives and helped considerably to win that horrible war.

And so, I embarked upon another long journey into the inspiring life experience of another “Bob.” Now I look forward to sharing his story with you.

This book contains a compilation of historical events in connection to the people who were instrumental in them. The information for these events and the biographical portrayals of the people involved were drawn from a variety of sources, including organizations, internet, military magazines, and books. Primary book sources for which much of the invaluable factual and historical content presented in this book include:

-Conant, Jennet. *A Covert Affair*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2011.

-Kindersley, Dorling. *Smithsonian WWII*. New York: DK Publishing, 2015.

-McKay, Sinclair. *The Secret Lives of Codebreakers*. New York: Penguin Group, 2010.

-Persico, Joseph E. *Roosevelt’s Secret War*. New York: Random House Inc., 2001.

-Waller, Douglas. *Wild Bill Donovan*. New York: Free Press, 2011.

In addition, the events in the life of Robert Holmstrom as they appear in this book are as he himself recalled them. Any departure from the truth or actual facts by either Robert Holmstrom or myself is purely unintentional.

—S. Fabian Butalla, 2018

# Introduction

1944

A FOREST ON THE EASTERN BORDER OF GERMANY. A man embraces the trunk of a tree as he stands shuddering in the cool night air. Darkness has woven its fingers throughout the thick woods and he has reason to be fearful. He arrived at this place more than an hour ago and he has not moved since then. His breath comes in short, shallow spurts as he waits. He has been here before and he has waited before, for the moon to rise. The first glimpse is a hint of amber on the horizon. As minutes pass, a yellow arc grows slowly into a golden orb that continues to rise in the dark sky. The gold turns to silver, and as the moon continues its steady ascent in the night sky, shafts of light penetrate the blackness between the trees, revealing a secret – there are others in the forest. There are both men and women, as well as some older children, all waiting for something...and they wait at great peril to themselves.

They cannot see it, but they all hear it. From afar, a faint sound is detected—a sound they all recognize. At first it is merely a purr, but it morphs into a steady drone as it gets nearer. Finally, it is a deafening rumble as it approaches, and there it is—a huge B-24, painted entirely black, flying low with no lights over the tree tops. It has come to deliver its load, which in this case is not a bomb. Rather, it is the highly-anticipated supplies desperately

needed by these people of the resistance against Hitler's Nazi regime.

The plane has something else to deliver—spies. These were highly- covert missions flown by a group of specially-trained U.S. airmen, who were code-named “Carpetbaggers.” The men and women (some spies were female,) and those on the ground, all participated in the dangerous air drops into enemy territory, acknowledging the risk to themselves.

These secret, extremely dangerous missions were carried out by a select group of World War II airmen and women who were there in response to the people waiting in the forest. The plane's crew of “Carpetbaggers” shielded the reality of America's involvement in clandestine operations during the war. They were sworn to secrecy for forty years after the war ended.

It has become one of America's best-kept secrets.

# WARBIRDS IN THE CLOAK OF DARKNESS

The Amazing True Story of American Airman  
Robert Holmstrom and the Top Secret  
'Operation Carpetbagger' During WWII

S. FABIAN BUTALLA

HELLGATE PRESS



ASHLAND, OREGON



## Along the Shores of Gitchee Gumee

A YOUNG BOY SAT WITH HIS DOG ON A promontory high above the big lake. The wind fiercely blew the hair out of his eyes as it simultaneously forced large waves to collide with the rocky shoreline. As always, the boy was mesmerized by the unceasing cadence of the rolling water capped with white froth. Its collision with the shore was both thunderous and spectacular. Like an orchestra repeating the same chorus again and again, the waves continued the forceful march to their destiny on the rocks, culminating with a roar as a sudden explosion of water was hurled into the air. The little terrier barked loudly each time this happened, and the boy clapped, hoping for an encore, which was assured on that windy day.

The boy was Robert Holmstrom, called “Bob” or “Bud” by his family and friends. He and his dog named “Spot” often went to that same place, and he was spell-bound by the sight of the seemingly endless body of water, until his trance was broken by



The Great Lakes

the pain and growling in his stomach. Hunger was part of his everyday state-of-being. Slowly he stood and urged Spot to follow him to their home in Knife River, as they turned away from the huge lake known as “Superior,” or “Gitche Gumee” (the “shining big-sea water” to the native American Ojibwe people).

Connected to the Atlantic Ocean by means of the St. Lawrence Seaway, the Great Lakes of the United States spread into the heartland of the North American continent. Furthest inland, and largest of the five lakes, is Superior, which borders Canada to the north, Wisconsin and Michigan to the south, and Minnesota to the west. According to *Lake Superior Magazine*, Superior is by surface area the world’s largest fresh water lake (roughly the size of the state of Maine.)<sup>1</sup> At the westernmost point of this great lake is Duluth, Minnesota. Twenty miles from Duluth, up the north shore of the lake, lies the community of Knife River.

Around the turn of the century, many people from European countries emigrated to the United States in search of a better living. Groups of Scandinavians settled in the areas of northern



Minnesota to work in the iron ore mines or to cultivate farms, or to do any other kind of work they could find to support themselves and their families. They were particularly attracted to the landscape in this area since it was remarkably similar to their homeland with its forests, and its clear-water lakes and streams.

One of these men was named Uno Holmstrom, whose father had been born in Finland and emigrated to the U.S. with hopes of working in the iron ore mines around the town of Two Harbors, Minnesota. Uno worked as a laborer, doing any odd jobs that came his way. He met a girl named Goldie who had moved to the Knife River area, north of Two Harbors, after having traveled there by covered wagon with her family from Missouri. Along the way, her mother gave birth to a boy.

Uno and Goldie were married and on January 4, 1926, they traveled to the hospital in Two Harbors where they had a son and



The northern Minnesota home of Bob's maternal grandparents, where he spent his early years.

they named him “Robert Eugene Holmstrom.” It was a bitter fifty degrees below zero that day. They moved frequently, with Uno seeking work wherever he could find it. For a few years Uno was hired to work on the construction of Highways 23 and 61, which is the north shore highway that runs from Duluth, Minnesota along the western edge of Lake Superior all the way to Thunder Bay, Canada. At times, Uno moved his family along with the construction crews.

Life was difficult for the young family, as they struggled to make ends meet. They basically lived off the land, with vegetables raised in a garden if they were in one place long enough to reap the harvest. Squirrels, fish, and rabbits were a staple of their diet, and the plentiful deer provided a valuable addition to their table if Uno had time to hunt, which was rare. They raised a few chickens and geese, which was a special treat when roasted. Goldie and her mother picked wild berries when they were in season, and everyone enjoyed them. Still there never seemed enough to satisfy the hunger of a growing boy, since much of what they were able to obtain had to be preserved for the days and months ahead.

As young Bob sensed it was dinnertime, he left the scenic overlook above Lake Superior, shouting, “Let’s go, boy!” and Spot sprinted ahead as they returned to the rented farmhouse where the family was preparing to eat the evening meal. Three rabbits had been skinned and stewed with carrots, onions, and a few potatoes from the garden. The enticing aroma of cooked meat beckoned everyone to the table, yet it was a meager meal for five people. Bob and his parents had been living with his grandparents since he was born.

The largest pieces of meat were unquestionably delivered to the bowls of his grandfather and father. His mother and grandmother helped themselves next, with the remaining small pieces placed in Bob’s bowl. Spot relished the occasional tidbit handed to him under the table by the boy. No one was full after

the meal. At times, his uncle and his cousins would join them for dinner and they would bring extra food – often fish or birds.

It was a well-ingrained rule from early childhood in the Holmstrom household that only adults were allowed to speak at the table. Children were to remain silent until excused to leave the dining area. Any time Bob broke that rule or any other of his father's expectations, he was subjected to physical punishment. Uno Holmstrom was a hardened disciplinarian who believed in the old adage of "Spare the rod, spoil the child." Consequently, Bob was often the victim of a leather strap, then sent to bed.

His parents provided the basic needs for their son (food, clothing, and shelter,) but they neglected to give him the one thing that he both needed and craved, and that was love. Taking care of him was simply treated as part of their daily chores, and he was denied any show of affection.

Bob's only understanding of real love and devotion was nurtured in his early years by his relationship with Spot, who seemed to always sense his loneliness and pain as he followed him to his room after a whipping. The loyal little terrier would nestle closely to Bob, whimpering softly with compassionate eyes as the young boy cried himself to sleep again, sometimes not even knowing what he had done to deserve the punishment. Equal to the physical sting of the strap was the humiliation of being exiled to his sparsely-furnished room.

In spite of the treatment by his parents, Bob enjoyed living in that beautiful part of the country. The scenic water of the Knife River flowed across the road from the farmhouse where he spent his early years. During times of dry weather, the dark granite and basalt rocks of the riverbed were exposed. With plentiful rainfall, the river channeled a current of water that flowed between the cities of Two Harbors and Duluth on the way to its union with Lake Superior. The area was heavily forested. During the warmer

months, meadows were graced with a profusion of brilliant wildflowers. Carpeting the spaces between the meadows and the woods were fields that were plowed and planted by farmers. They hoped for a harvest of crops to be consumed by their families and their farm animals.

Bob would tell you, “We were dirt poor, but I didn’t know it.” One summer, as the road crew moved further away from Two Harbors, Uno, Goldie, and their young son lived for the entire summer in a tent by a ditch along the highway. There was a dirt floor in the tent, that they covered with cardboard at night before lying down to sleep. Meals were cooked over an open campfire and clothes were washed in the river. A few others who could not find or afford to rent places to live, pitched tents near the Holmstroms. Bob just felt like they were on an extended camping trip and does not remember being uncomfortable in the tent – except for the multitude of mosquitos, which made you miserable as long as you were awake.

About the time Bob turned five years old, he had experienced many adventures with Spot and sometimes his cousins in that rugged terrain. It was not a happy day for him when his parents announced that they were moving because his father had heard about a better job. It didn’t take long for them to get their meager possessions ready for the move. They headed more than 180 miles south to the metropolitan city of St. Paul, Minnesota, where Fort Snelling is located. From that fort, Bob Holmstrom would one day begin his clandestine military service in a second global war.

## Between Two Wars

**E**IGHT YEARS BEFORE BOB HOLMSTROM was born, “The War to End All Wars” was over. Throughout the ravages of World War I, nine million soldiers had died and twenty-one million had been wounded. An additional five million civilians had perished from starvation or disease.<sup>1</sup> Three international measures were taken in hopes of maintaining peace in the world:

1. First the Treaty of Versailles was signed in 1919 by the allied and associated powers and by Germany as an end of the unprecedented carnage.

2. The following year, the League of Nations was created in an attempt to prevent future devastation between countries. Headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland, it provided a forum for resolving international disputes, which would hopefully provide “security and a lasting, friendly peace.”

3. Nine years later, with unrest in some countries around the world, a peace pact was proposed by Aristide Briand, French Minister of Foreign Affairs and developed by U.S. Secretary of State Frank S. Kellogg. It was signed in Paris on August 27, 1928.

Named the Kellogg-Briand Pact, it outlawed war as national policy. As with the League of Nations, it called upon those who signed it to settle their disputes in a peaceful manner. Countries who originally signed the pact included France, the United States, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, India, Belgium, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Germany, Italy, and Japan. Later, an additional forty-seven nations also signed, which ultimately made it a peace agreement between nearly all of the established nations of the world.<sup>2</sup>

All seemed well.

However, both the Kellogg-Briand Pact and the League of Nations faced the same problem. There was no way to enforce the regulations against those who broke them. In 1931, Japan attacked Manchuria. The Chinese were unprepared for such an act, and in a matter of a few months Japan had seized control of the entire region in the far north-eastern provinces of China, along with its valuable resources.<sup>3</sup>

Due to the world-wide Depression, no action was taken against the aggressor, and without interference, soon Japan occupied all of Manchuria, in clear violation of the Pact. In 1933 the Japanese delegates walked out of the League of Nations Council and never looked back. They continued their aggression into Chinese territories.<sup>4</sup>

As history has proven, several leaders around the world shared a lust for more land and power, which would splinter the pacts and treaties that had been signed with the intention of world peace.

1. Benito Mussolini became the dictator of Italy in 1925 after he successfully established a system of public works. As a result, when employment rose he gained popularity. However, his desire to enlarge his empire would eventually lead him down a path of shame and ruin.<sup>5</sup>

2. Showa Hirohito became emperor of Japan in 1926. He and

the people of Japan ascribed to the centuries-old belief that all of the Japanese emperors were descendants of the founding god. It was therefore the duty of the emperor to maintain the prosperity of the country. They also believed that “the Japanese were a superior race, destined to rule the world.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, they set their sights on China, rich in the natural resources that Japan lacked.

3. Joseph Stalin was appointed sole dictator of the Soviet Union on January 1, 1929. He began a long and vicious reign of terror against anyone who opposed him, and he became a heartless dictator, killing millions as he seized Ukrainian farmlands.<sup>7</sup>

4. Adolph Hitler, was to become Fuhrer of Germany in 1934. He had been nurturing the conviction that it was imperative for Germany to expand its “living space” for pure-bred German people, called “Aryans.” By convincing the native Germans that all Jewish people were a threat to them, he would reduce the population in his country by many millions. He was just beginning to build the infamous “Nazi killing machine.”<sup>8</sup>

Mussolini, Hirohito, Stalin, and Hitler—each of these leaders was convinced that he must expand his realm in order to secure power and prosperity. They vowed to let nothing stand in their way, including the Treaty of Versailles, the League of Nations and the Kellogg-Briand Pact, as they marched forward to inevitable war and even more death and destruction.

The only exception was the Japanese Emperor Hirohito, who remained passive in preventing the millions of deaths and devastation caused by his country’s dominant Imperial Army.

The seeds of war were sown with Mussolini in Italy, Hirohito in Japan, Stalin in the Soviet Union, and Hitler in Germany, all with a strong desire to conquer other lands. Wars were but a matter of time on both sides of the world from countries in the western Pacific to those east of the Atlantic.

In the middle was the United States, recovering from World

War I. The U.S. had taken a firm position of neutrality. The vast majority of American citizens were strongly opposed to engaging in another war.

The situations in the Asian Pacific and in many European countries were becoming more threatening, although at that time, nearly everyone in the United States (including most of the leaders) failed to recognize it.