



Robert "Bob" (NMI) BUTLER **WWII GLIDER PILOT**

A Concise Biography

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Robert "Bob" Butler was born in Battle Creek, Michigan, on Wednesday, 21 April 1915. For reasons unknown he was not given a middle name. His parents had two additional children, another boy and a girl. They and his grandparents lived in Battle Creek for years, and much of Bob's early years were spent there. He was the nephew of W. K. Kellogg of Battle Creek, the cereal king. The first few years of his life were still horse and buggy days. There were a few cars around but they were not as plentiful. His parents and relatives were pioneers in the development of a number of popular Battle Creek breakfast cereals. Bob's mother was an accomplished equestrian, and he said that as a youth he did a lot of horseback riding. He completed elementary school in Battle Creek. By the time he was 15 years old he had earned his Eagle Scout badge, a noteworthy accomplishment.

His father was transferred to Chicago, Illinois, and then to Canada, where Bob graduated from high school. He completed one year of college before leaving home at age 18. He landed a job as a salesman for the Western Biscuit Company in Indianapolis, Indiana, and worked for that company in Syracuse, Albany, Chicago and Detroit. Bob's mother liked to fly and he soon got the bug. He enrolled in the Roscoe Turner Flight School in Indianapolis and soon earned his private pilot's license. Flying was a fun thing for him. After soloing he would fly up to Battle Creek and buzz his mom's house and she would come out and wave. As a young adult Bob was short in stature at 5 feet 7½ inches and weighed 150 pounds. He had hazel eyes and brown hair.

Towards the end of 1941, while living in Indianapolis, Indiana, Bob received a telegram from Uncle Sam notifying him that he was being drafted in the US Army. So off he went to war. He was 26 years old, a bit older than the 18 to 20 year old young men that were drafted with him. A very serious minded young fellow, he was not anxious to join the military, but neither was he a conscientious objector. He simply felt that war didn't resolve anything. However, without hesitation he reported for duty, went through the grueling basic training, and was subsequently assigned to the Coast Guard and was assigned to the Coast Artillery. He was sequestered in the isolation of Seattle's boondocks manning a coastal barrage balloon that among other things protected the Boeing Aircraft Company.

Bob, whose job was the hydrogen gas technician and winch operator on the twelve man crew that was on alert day and night, seven days a week. Food was brought in to them. There was absolutely nothing to do but sit and wait for an enemy that never came. There was little change from one day to the next, and life to Bob was far from ideal. Supposedly the military hierarchy felt that the Japanese might attack the west coast at any minute and the barrage balloon cables were going to entangle the invading aircraft. Bored stiff, Bob found a small

folding table, located a typewriter, and decided to do some writing. His superiors felt otherwise and told him to get rid of them.

One day an officer came through camp seeking volunteers for the new Army Air Force Glider Program. It offered Bob an opportunity to fly and become a part of a pioneer organization, and he jumped at the opportunity. Volunteers were required to have earned a civilian private pilot's license, pass a flying physical examination, and score 65 or better on the Aviation Cadet Mental Screening Test or 110 or better on the Army General Classification Test (AGCT). Bob had a civilian private pilot's license and felt certain that he could meet the other requirements. He wanted very much to leave his present duty behind, and the thought of becoming a military aviator intrigued him.

He was among the first to sign up, was accepted, and began pre-glider training in light planes at an unknown civilian contract flight school. In pre-glider he flew Taylorcraft L-2s, Aeronca L-3s and Piper L-4s. Most of the training was dead-stick training. Students were required to fly to a predetermined altitude, retard the throttle, cut the ignition switch, pull the plane's nose up to stop the prop from wind milling and land the plane without power, as though it were a glider.

From pre-glider school he was transferred to a dude ranch with an airstrip in Tucumcari, New Mexico, for basic glider training. There he trained in high performance sailplanes such as the Schweizer TG-2, logging 30 plus hours of flight time. The dude ranch had its own French chef. Bob's instructor was a German defector, a world-famous glider instructor who trained Germans before the war. Glider training at Tucumcari was a great experience. He enjoyed riding thermals and being able to stay aloft for long periods. Glider planners at Headquarters, 1st Troop Carrier Command at Stout Field, Indianapolis, soon realized that sailplane flight characteristics were in no way similar to those of a military combat glider with a glide ratio of about 12 to 1.

Because of a severe shortage of the big 15-place Waco CG-4A cargo glider Bob was transferred to Bowman Field where he again flew the L-2, L-3 and L-4 AAF liaison aircraft. He once again practiced dead-stick landings, day and night. Since the airlines shared the field with the military it must have driven the airline pilots crazy when they approached the field with so many young pilots making dead-stick landings sharing the same air space and they had no radios.

During his tenure at Bowman he was placed on temporary duty to Kansas City, Missouri, for the purpose of ferrying 9-place Waco CG-3A cargo glider to South Plains Army Air Field, Lubbock, Texas. He asserted that Lubbock was one of the worst thermal areas he had ever experienced. It shook the hell out of the CG-3A, he said. During one of his ferrying flights he was unable to release the tow rope and the tow plane towed him around the field several times. Finally the tow pilot realized the problem and released the glider. As a result the dangling tow rope was dragged along the ground during the landing approach and the landing. Fortunately, it did not snag on anything.

Following the ferrying job, Bob was transferred to Victorville, California, for advanced training in the 15-place Waco CG-4A combat glider. There he was assigned to Class 43-3. After completing 15 hours of dual and solo flight in the CG-4A he graduated on 17 February 1943, receiving his coveted sterling silver "G" wings and promotion to Flight Officer, a wartime rank equivalent to warrant officer. The pay was the same as a Second Lieutenant, plus flight pay amounting to 50% of base pay. As a Flight Officer he had all the privileges of a commissioned officer, but the rank was never fully accepted as a full-fledged officer.

While based at Victorville, a Los Angeles friend fixed him and another glider pilot up with a couple of starlets in Los Angeles. Bob liked the starlet's roommate, Lee Hollen, better than his own date, and began seeing her. Not long afterwards he was transferred to Laurinburg-Maxton Army Air Base, Maxton, North Carolina, for tactical glider training. Having fallen in love with Lee, Bob, wrote and phoned her regularly. They subsequently became engaged. Even though an overseas assignment was inevitable, he and 19-year-old, Lee, were married on Sunday, 6 June 1943, in New Orleans, Louisiana. They had known each other only six months. During a double-tow flight one day he was involved in a mid-air collision that bent about fifteen feet of his tail section. Fortunately he was able to land the glider safely.

Upon completion of the training at LMAAB he was appointed a CG-4A night flying instructor. In that role he said that he washed out quite a few students because they freaked out when it came to landing a CG-4A at night with only the dim light of a smudge pot to guide them. He admitted that training gliders took one hell of a beating but the Waco glider proved to be very durable.

Following LMAAB he was assigned to Fort Benning, Georgia, for airborne ground combat training. At Benning he learned to fire all of the airborne weapons. There was the possibility that he would have to fight when he landed troops and equipment behind enemy lines, so it was imperative that he know how to defend himself. In later years he said that he didn't have to kill an enemy combatant and was pleased

Bob was assigned to the 74th Troop Carrier Squadron, 434th Troop Carrier Group before going overseas in 1943. Ten months after his marriage the 434th Troop Carrier Group was ordered overseas. His unit sailed to Europe on 1 April 1944 on the RMS Mauritania, a converted passenger liner. The ship docked in the United Kingdom 9 April 1944. The 434th TCG was assigned to Aldermaston (AAF Station 467), an airbase west of London, in Berkshire. At Aldermaston, most of Bob's time was spent training for combat. He learned to fly the huge British Airspeed Horsa glider that could carry 28 equipped troops, as opposed to 13 for the CG-4A. He said that he trained for night landings in exceptionally small fields and over all sorts of obstacles with both the Horsa and the CG-4A.

To relax from the constant training, he said that he used the proceeds from a poker game aboard ship to buy a brand-new English bicycle. Bob said that he peddled it for hundreds of miles through the beautiful countryside, stopping occasionally at one of their interesting pubs. He admitted that the bicycle rides gave him an opportunity to get his mind off the war. Even though he tried not to think about combat, Bob saw firsthand the build-up as it progressed. As D-Day approached, members of the 434th were on alert just about 24-hours a day. He said that he didn't get much sleep the first week in June. He had been selected to fly one of the 52 gliders in the "Chicago Serial," on D-Day, 6 June 1944, the first glider mission. Butler would fly the most notable CG-4A in Europe, "*The Fighting Falcon*," built in Michigan, Bob's home state.

The Fighting Falcon, built by the Gibson Refrigerator Company of Greenville, Michigan, donated to the Army Air Force by the public school children of Greenville who raised the money selling war bonds and stamps. They actually sold enough war bonds and stamps to permit the Army Air Force to purchase not one, but several CG-4As, but only one was named. When the *Fighting Falcon* arrived in England in April 1944, Major General Paul Williams, CG of the Ninth Troop Carrier Command, decreed that it would be the lead glider in the first glider mission.

The Fighting Falcon was originally scheduled to be the lead glider, Chalk No. 1¹ in the first serial on D-Day, 6 June 1944, with Lt. Col. Mike Murphy at the controls. Murphy was a former stunt pilot and the highest ranking glider pilot in the ETO. His load was Brigadier General Don F. Pratt, Asst. Division Commander of the 101st Airborne Division, the General's aide, 1st Lt. John L. May, and the General's personal jeep containing his Command Radio Set, SCR-284, and several jerry cans of gasoline. On 2 or 3 June Murphy made the decision to replace the older model *Fighting Falcon* with a CG-4A, Serial No. 43-41430, equipped with the Griswold Nose Protection Device. The original *Fighting Falcon* was shunted back to Chalk No. 45 position and Flight Officer Bob Butler became its pilot. His copilot was Flight Officer E. H. "Tim" Hohmann, from Glenview, Illinois. He stated in an interview that before the mission he was issued a toy metal cricket for identification purposes. One click of the cricket was to be answered by two clicks.

The replacement CG-4A was painted to look like the original *Fighting Falcon*, so two gliders in the Chicago serial ended up bearing the name, *The Fighting Falcon*. As fate would have it, the replacement Falcon crashed into a hedgerow on Landing Zone "E" on D-Day killing both General Pratt and the glider's copilot, Second Lieutenant John M. Butler. Col. Murphy was severely injured, suffering two broken legs and a knee injury, while Lt. John L. May was shaken up but suffered only a few abrasions.

The original *Fighting Falcon*, flown by Butler, carried thirteen glider troops. According to an article by Gerard Pahl in the January 2006 issue of the Air Classic magazine, Butler was wearing inch-thick goggles to protect his eyes from phosphorus shell bursts. On the final approach he had Hohmann deploy the deceleration parachute. Still landing too fast, he said that he stalled the glider, wiping out the landing gear. Hohmann claimed that the landing gear was wiped out when hit a knoll. Otherwise, the glider was undamaged and no one was injured. Bob said he and his copilot and passengers vacated the glider immediately and sought cover from the heavy ground fire. He later said that he landed two fields away from the replacement *Fighting Falcon*.

Later in the day he remembered that it was his first wedding anniversary. He related in a letter, dated 15 July 1999, that he subsisted in Normandy on cheese and saltines that he carried in his pockets and drank only the water in his canteen. He spent three days behind enemy lines before being evacuated back to England. Before being evacuated he and a number of other glider pilots marched some German POWs down to Omaha Beach and turned them over to the beach master for transport to England. He and his fellow GPs then took an amphibious landing craft out to the ships in the channel on which he returned to England.

When Bob arrived back in the UK he was promoted to second lieutenant. Almost immediately, he and his squadron mates began making preparations for the Holland mission, scheduled for sometime in the immediate future. One day he was given a pass to London where for the first time he experienced the deadly V-1 buzz bombs that rained on the city. He said that he spent a harrowing night listening to the pulse jets as they passed overhead. He noted the next day that the bombs did considerable damage to the buildings in the surrounding area.

Operation Market-Garden, his second glider combat mission took place on 18 September 1944. The circuitous flight to Holland was long and tiring, much of it flown in dense fog. For protection against enemy flak, Bob placed a piece of German armor plating that he had liberated from a tank under his posterior. His glider carried a 75 mm howitzer, the five man gun crew and shells for the artillery piece. He made a fairly safe landing near Eindhoven, but did clip off about four feet of one wing when he hit a telephone pole. No one in

the glider was injured. Once his glider was unloaded, Bob made his way to Brussels, then to France and subsequently back to England.

While in Brussels he was involved in an incident that was humorous in the telling. He was with some enlisted troopers and the lot looked pretty shabby. They were filthy, he said, and in need of a shave. British MPs took them for possible spies and interrogated them overnight before releasing them.

Though he did not participate in the Battle of the Bulge glider missions in December 1944, he did fly copilot in one of the C-47s flying resupply missions carrying gasoline for General Patton's Third Army tanks. In February 1945, the 434th moved to Mourmelon-le-Grand, France, in preparation for the Rhine River Crossing mission. Bob said that the flies were so bad in France that he spent most of his time spraying them with can after can of DDT, killing literally hundreds of them. He said he breathed so much deadly DDT that he was surprised that he didn't develop lung cancer. Some years later DDT was abolished because of its danger to humans and was cause of egg shell problems of wild birds such as the eagle.

Bob's third and last glider mission, Operation Varsity, the Rhine River crossing into Germany, near Wesel, took place on 24 March 1945. His glider carried a jeep and four men. At an altitude of about 400 feet on his landing approach, his glider received a burst of flak in the nose. The exploding shell filled the cabin with dense smoke. The shell's concussion caused Bob to lose consciousness momentarily, but he quickly recovered his senses. Seeing that the aileron control cables above his head were completely severed by the flak burst he reached up and grasped the ends of the cables and through extraordinary effort maneuvered his glider into the proper landing area, landing safely amid huge bomb craters and high tension wires surrounding the LZ (Landing Zone).

For his quick thinking and heroic action he was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross on General Orders No. 91, HQ IX TCC, dated 20 June 1945. He had already been awarded two Air Medals and a Distinguished Unit Badge with a bronze arrowhead and five battle stars to the EAME Ribbon for his previous combat missions. Bob was a reluctant hero, telling me several times that he didn't feel like a hero. He reiterated that he was drafted much against his better judgment, hated being in the war, did what he was told and got out as soon as he could. When he was released from active duty he never looked back. He also lost all interest in flying.

Between missions, Bob had some interesting experiences. Through a friend of his, who was commander of the Exeter Naval Base, arrangements were made for him (Bob) to go on a short raid with Commander Buckley's PT squadron, and through another friend from his home town, Battle Creek, Michigan, arrangements were made for him to go on a flight in a Boeing B-17 bomber. Both experiences were enlightening.

Shortly after V-J Day, he was returned to the United States by ship, departing England on 8 July 1945, and arriving in the United States on 16 July. Shortly after being repatriated he was told to prepare for the invasion of Japan. On his way to the West Coast he stopped in Albuquerque to visit a scientist friend and they celebrated the occasion with a party on 5 August 1945. In a conversation that evening, Bob expressed his concern about glider flights into Japan. His clairvoyant friend asserted that it would not be necessary, and it wasn't. The Army Air Force dropped the first of two atomic bombs on Japan and shortly thereafter Japan capitulated.

Second Lieutenant Robert (NMI) Butler was released from active duty on 29 November 1945 at the AAF Separation Base at Santa Ana, California, and was presented his "ruptured

duck” pin, denoting WWII service. He had served his country for nearly four years. His home address on military records was 126 Garrison Avenue, Battle Creek, Michigan. He decided not to stay in the US Army Air Force Reserve, which was not unexpected.

The Butler-Hollen union produced two daughters and a son, who produced four grandchildren and one great-grandchild. After World War II he worked in sales for the Western Biscuit Company in California, and also a Baltimore company. He said with pride that his talented wife was an excellent equestrian, golfer, sailor, knitted, and played chess and bridge. In March 1976 he and his family were living at 223 Grand Canal on Balboa Island, California 92662. Sometime later he moved to 251 Calle Del Verano, Palm Desert, California 92260, his home in April 2011.

Bob was aware of the National World War II Glider Pilot Association, but for reasons known only to him he never joined the organization. In an 18 June 1998 letter to Jack Welborn in Tyler, Texas, a former WWII glider mechanic, Bob said that he had an enormous respect for the CG-4A glider. He related that while on double tow during the early part of his training that the glider on his port side lost control and struck Bob’s glider bending about fifteen feet of the tail section. He asked his instructor if he wanted to take over and he haltingly said “no... just keep going straight and land wherever you can.” Bob landed in a corn field and fortunately the tail held together. He heaved a sigh of relief and went on with his training.

(this paragraph needs reworked) He said to me once that he held the glider mechanics of the 26th Mobile Reclamation [young men,] based at Crookham Common, England, many of them teenagers, assembled the majority of the gliders used in the Normandy, Southern France, Holland, Battle of the Bulge and the Rhine River Crossing missions, and these over-achievers did most of the assembly outdoors under severe weather conditions and exceeded their assigned quotas time after time.

On 22 April 2005, Bob, his wife, Lee, and their two daughters, Stephanie and Charlotte (Butler) Sharf, and her husband, Jim, visited the Kalamazoo Aviation History Museum (commonly known as the Air Zoo) to see the fully restored CG-4A, “*The Fighting Falcon*,” clone on display there. It was truly a trip back in time for him, and one he enjoyed immensely, he said. As the 90-year-old reluctant warrior stood looking at the glider there were tears of remembrance in his eyes. In June 2011 he and Lee will have been married 68 years. He and I still correspond on matters relating to our glider days of yesteryear. It is a relationship forged in history.

Note 1: Large numbers were literally chalked on the nose of a glider to show its position in the serial.

Note 2: This biography was originally written on 24 April 2000. It was revised or expanded on 19 June, 6 July and 26 August 2006, December 2008 and April 2011 due to newly uncovered data. Much of the information was furnished by Robert Butler. In April 2011, Bob mailed me a biography of his life on DVD, photographed during a lengthy interview.

[*Back to Normandy accounts*](#)