

THE MAN WHO FELL TO EARTH

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*This book is dedicated to
Robert Gordon Givens and his family,
to Eleanor and Louis J. Fabian...and to
Derek Olson, Erika Kneen, Janice Wallake,
Karen Silverwood, and Jack for their support.*

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**THE
MAN
WHO
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EARTH**

**The Incredible
True Story of
WWII Flyboy
Robert Givens**

S. Fabian Butalla

Preface

THE UNITED STATES VETERANS OF WORLD WAR II were young when the call to duty arose. Many were drafted into military service. Others felt compelled to join the fight for freedom as volunteers against the unprovoked attack by Japan on the American forces at Pearl Harbor and the atrocities of Adolph Hitler's Nazi regime. Thus the world was at war on fronts both east and west of the United States from 1939 to 1945.

Bob Givens was eighteen years old when he opted to join the Air Corps, and he was both proud and anxious to serve his country. He was sent to the European Theater of Operation as a top turret gunner on a B-17. Surviving a fall from his plane as it broke apart and his subsequent landing in the North Sea was nothing short of miraculous. A variety of people and events that impacted him in his early life gave Bob the determination, skills, and confidence to overcome nearly-certain death then and at several other times throughout his long life.

The majority of surviving World War II veterans are over ninety years old, or have passed away, and their stories have gone with them in most cases. I was privileged to interview

Bob Givens, who was eighty-nine years old at the time, as he gladly shared his life story with me. It is an honor to have been able to preserve it, not only for his family, but for posterity as well.

Home on the Range

WINTERS IN NORTHERN MINNESOTA ARE OFTEN notoriously harsh. As heavy snow bundled up the small village of Leonidas and all exposed drops of liquid transformed into crystalline hardness, 1933 was no exception to the norm. The townspeople waited for the fluffy whiteness to stop falling. Then the shovels would emerge from garages, basements, and porches where they had become home to dust bunnies and spiders over the past several months. The cleanup would begin like an on-time parade. Up and down the streets, most of the men, some women, and a few of the older children donned every piece of warm clothing they possessed and shovels in hand, they literally “put their backs into it” as they cleared sidewalks, driveways, and ice-skating rinks.

As soon as they were able to leave their yards, children appeared, looking like walking cocoons as nearly every inch of their bodies was muffled and wrapped. With wooden

sleds in tow, they were heading for the sliding hill on the edge of town. Some, with skates slung over their shoulders and a hockey stick or a broom in hand, forged their way to the local ice rink.

In the basement of one of the homes, on such a winter night, a group of young boys was chatting with one another as each of them was focused on the project at hand. While every one of them enjoyed sledding and ice skating, they were all committed to being exactly where they were at that time. It was a meeting of an exclusive number of eight-to-ten-year-old boys who shared an interest in making model airplanes. They had trudged through the deep snow in places where the shovels had not yet touched. The parents of one boy named Ed had agreed to allow his friends to come to their home periodically and they offered their basement as a place for them to congregate. A large table in the middle of the room with an overhead light provided just what was needed for the boys to work on their individual creations.

In the early 1930s, a model airplane kit could be purchased at the local dime store for ten-to-twenty-five cents. Most of the boys earned the money by doing chores such as piling wood, shoveling sidewalks, or mowing grass in the summer. Each boy purchased his own kit and brought it to Ed's house for assembly, which could take several days to complete. While some kits may have included the same type of plane, the way they were painted or finished off distinguished each one from the others.

As the boys opened their kits, studied the directions, and laid out the pieces, one lad's thoughts lead him further than

the parts on the table before him. His mind took him beyond the rock walls of that basement as he imagined himself actually lifting off the ground, and flying through the air. Often wondering how birds were able to achieve flight, he was even more fascinated with the flying machines of the day. Young Bob Givens pictured himself in one of those planes and tried to visualize what it must be like to experience the power of flight.

Most of the boys seemed less fixated on the idea of actually flying in a plane someday. Rather, they loved the camaraderie of the airplane club and their finished models which they could then play with or display on a shelf at home. However, over the years, Bob's thoughts and dreams were often filled with wishful longings of flight.

As numbered pieces of balsa wood were removed from a kit, careful study was given by each boy to the plan for assembling his new plane. In order to protect the plan, wax paper was placed between it and the thin sheets of balsa wood. The fuselage, wings, struts, and props all had to be carefully cut out and then glued together. There was also a paper in the box which was stamped with outlines of the ribs and certain other parts of the plane. These also had to be cut from balsa and glued to the plane. Then came the paint, and each boy thoughtfully chose his colors. Finally, the kits contained a certain type of clear paper that had to be placed around the model and pulled as firmly as possible. When it was sprayed with water, the clear wrap tightened around the plane and gave it a shiny finish. It all took time and patience. Some of the boys had more experience in making models than the others and they would willingly

lend a helping hand. It was always a time of happiness for these boys, and in later years, Bob would admit, "It kept us out of trouble."

Born on January 21, 1924 at the Moore Hospital in Eveleth, Minnesota, Bob was the only child of Laura and George Gordon Givens. Their home was in the adjacent mining village of Leonidas, which was named after the prospector Leonidas Merritt, who first discovered iron ore in that area. It was part of the great Minnesota Iron Range, that produced massive amounts of pure red ore which was removed from open pits and subterranean mines all over that part of the state for more than one hundred years.

George Givens had worked in the copper mines of Michigan and he served as an engineer with the Rainbow Division of the Army during World War I, building bridges across France. When he returned to Michigan after his military service, he married a girl named Laura Brown. They had heard about the boom on Minnesota's Iron Range and the need for workers, especially those who spoke English. So George and Laura moved to Leonidas where he worked as a stationary engineer (elevator operator) for the Oliver Mining Company, hoisting and lowering men, timber, and ore at the underground mine nearby, while his wife worked as a telephone operator.

Laura Givens was completely devoted to her son and she did everything she could to raise him properly. As the years passed, and no other children were born to them, little "Rob," as she often called him, became all the more precious to her. He was not allowed out of their yard without one of his parents until he was five years old. One day when several of



Bob's parents, Laura and George Givens.

the neighborhood children were running up and down the street playing tag, Bob decided to test the limits of his mother's cautious restrictions by lifting his foot to put it on the fence. Out the front door flew Laura Givens, brandishing a fly swatter, with which she smacked the seat of his pants. She didn't have to do it again. He had learned his lesson, and he respected her for it.

“She was just, I guess, so close to me that she didn’t want anything to happen to me,” reminisced Bob many years later. “It did me good later on.”

Not sure how much education his father had, Bob was nonetheless aware that his mother had only gone through the sixth grade. However, she was an excellent cook. Her meatloaf was better than steak, as far as Bob was concerned, and he devoured her wonderful vegetable/meat pies called “Pasties.” Laura kept an immaculate house, which was her castle. She knew how to set a perfect table. Somehow, Laura had learned a lot about manners, which she taught to young Bob from the time he was four years old. Bob’s mother instructed him in no uncertain terms that adults outside of their family were never to be addressed by their first names, but always by “Mr., Mrs., or Miss” followed by their last names.

Many years later, Bob freely admitted that although his dad never said much, he was a good provider, and Bob always knew that both of his parents loved him very much. Bob never heard them argue. “They got along perfectly. It was beautiful. I had the best mother and father any boy in this world could dream of,” he said with a wistful smile.

Things didn’t always go so smoothly for young Bob, however. His mother, in her desire to keep her young son clean and well-dressed, distinguished him from many of the neighborhood children, and he was bullied because of it. Believing he was spoiled due to the fact that he was an only child, and because of the nice, clean clothes he wore, Bob got called “Sissy” by some of the village boys. Most of those bullies wore torn overalls and dirty, worn-out boots. Bob

learned to fight his way out of it on several occasions until there was no more "Sissy."

Bob had grown taller than most of the boys in his class by the time he reached sixth grade. That year, he was asked to play Santa Claus for the kindergarten and young elementary students at the school. Bob was pleased to take on the role. Because his parents were so good to him, he had always believed in Santa himself, but he was taunted because of it. However, he had learned to deal with bullies before, and they didn't tease him for long.

Ice skating was one of the favorite pastimes of young people on the Iron Range, many of whom went on to gain fame as Olympians and professional hockey players. The large Eveleth "Hippodrome" was built to house an indoor skating area. On Saturdays, this arena had open skating, and since it was enclosed, for many it was a very welcome change from being outside in frigid temperatures. The Hippodrome was only a couple of miles from the Givens' home in Leonidas. Bob and his friends would often enjoy it on Saturdays as they grew up.

As luck would have it, there was a small outdoor ice rink directly across the street from Bob's house. The village maintained it, flooding it as soon as the temperature dropped below freezing in October. Young Bob and the neighborhood kids could skate there almost any day they wished throughout the winter.

Bob loved to go to the ice rink to play hockey. For boys like Bob, it was something to look forward to after school on long winter days. He could put on his skates at home and run over to the rink, where he and many others would skate



Bob playing hockey at the ice rink
across the street from his home.

until after dark. At 6:00 p.m., the front door of his house would open and his mother would call at the top of her lungs, "Rob, 'Jack Armstrong' is on!"

Bob would race across the street, remove his skates with practiced swiftness, and head straight for the kitchen. A primary form of entertainment for many families in those days was the radio. It provided music, news, and gripping, suspense-filled stories, which were most often broadcast in episodes. "Jack Armstrong" was Bob's favorite, and he tried to never miss one of Jack's adventures. Another program that fascinated Bob was "Jimmy Allen," which was about a

pilot. These stories had some fighting and a lot of action, and they kept Bob glued to the radio, hanging on every word. His imagination was in high gear as he visualized all of the characters who were speaking and every scenario that engulfed them.

The 4th of July was a time of celebration in most of the small towns across the Iron Range. Each year, George Givens would purchase a large bag of fireworks. Bob would run from house to house and tell all of the neighbors when the display would begin. Soon after dark, from the backyard of the Givens' home, skyrockets were lit. They traveled high into the air with a final burst of sparkling, colorful grandeur, much to the delight of everyone in the neighborhood.

Fishing was a pastime that Bob enjoyed with his dad occasionally, but they didn't have a boat. A neighbor named Ole had a nice wooden rowboat and two sons, one who was older and one younger than Bob. Once in a while, Ole's boys didn't want to go, so Ole would ask Bob to fish with him. He had a trailer for the boat and they would haul it over to Wynne Lake near Giant's Ridge or to Kendall Lake near Leonidas. Ole taught him how to make bobbers out of cedar with a bead on top. Then they would paint them.

Bob's birthday was always a big event at his house, and his mother would have a nice party for him. She would be busy for hours in the kitchen before the guests arrived. Besides family members, Bob was allowed to invite some of

his friends from school. Every year, they would all enjoy the same special cake that his mother made. It was a three-layer Devil's Food cake with lemon-custard filling, and Bob couldn't get enough of it.

At the age of eight, Bob joined the Boy Scouts and was officially dubbed a "Tenderfoot." Over the next eight years, he learned several skills that would serve him well in the future; most notably, swimming.

With a paddle in hand, he learned to navigate a canoe away from the shore, then dump the canoe. He was taught to swim under the overturned canoe and take a few breaths in the air space there in order to survive. He then swam back out, flipped the canoe, got back in, and paddled to shore. He was very proud of himself, knowing he could do this.

At the Chicagami Scout Camp a few miles south of Eveleth, there was an annual diving competition. After much practice, Bob achieved a high level of confidence and at the age of fifteen, he won an award for best diver, of which he also took much pride.

Bullying doesn't end with elementary school by any means, and Bob encountered it again at the Chicagami Camp with the Boy Scouts when he was in his teens. One boy was antagonizing several others including Bob by taunting them, using scare tactics and serious verbal threats. After deliberating about the situation, the boys approached the Scout Master. They described their dilemma and he listened thoughtfully. This man was an assistant football coach during the school season.

“How many of you are there?” he asked. “Can’t fifteen or twenty of you take care of one bully?”

The bunkhouses were screen enclosures with canvas sides. The Scout Master suggested a plan. “When he’s in bed, lift the canvas on his side and throw a bucket of water on him.”

They did just as he had advised them, and it worked. The bully stopped threatening others and he became a star football player on the team that won the Iron Range Football Conference title that year. Bob was also on that team.

So it was that young Bob learned about comradeship and the skills of being together and getting along with others during his years in the Boy Scouts. He gave that organization the utmost credit for instilling in him confidence in the water. He overcame fright and shock, and the experiences of going out into the lake to swim while at camp removed fear of the water from him. He had learned to love swimming.

During their formative years, some children are fortunate in having parents who encourage and make possible the exploration of a variety of skills. George and Laura Givens provided many opportunities for their son to engage in sports and other activities. His mother always said to Bob, “Whatever you do, try to do it well.” Thus began his introduction to music.

While his piano lessons with the teacher at the Leonidas School did not last long, Bob next tried the clarinet, which he played for several years. There was a village band in Leonidas and Bob joined it. When he was in ninth grade, he marched in a parade with the band and for doing so, he was paid a few dollars by the village.

This was a moment of decision for Bob, but he didn’t have

to think long before he was sure how he wanted to spend that money. Mounting his bicycle, he pedaled the five miles from Leonidas to the airport in the town of Virginia, where he hoped to get a ride in a real airplane. As he rode toward the runway, perspiring and out of breath, he saw a man just getting into a plane. Bob laid his bike down and ran toward the J3 Cub, in which the pilot sat ahead of a single passenger seat in a closed cockpit.

"Mister, please! Could you take me for a ride? Please?" he begged. "I can give you three dollars!"

Well, three dollars was a good amount of money back then, so the man replied, "Okay, come on, kid. I'll give you a ride."

It was Bob's first ride in an airplane, and it sure didn't disappoint him. He climbed into the back seat, more excited than he had ever been. As the engine revved up and the propeller began to rotate first slowly, then so fast you couldn't see the blades any longer, Bob's heart raced almost as quickly. The pilot guided the plane toward the runway and drove it like an automobile out to the end. Then he shouted to Bob, "Hold on kid!" They started slowly rolling down the runway. Before he knew it, they were racing down that runway, faster than Bob had ever traveled before. The liftoff was a moment of sheer euphoria for a young boy with dreams of flying.

The view was amazing as they cruised up over the towns of Virginia, Eveleth, and Leonidas. From the perspective of a bird, Bob gained a new insight into the area where he lived. His eyes were bulging and his mouth was agape at the sight of houses, buildings, mines, and roads, all surrounded by trees and lakes. It was definitely a dream-come-true for the young boy.

The following year, Bob heard about someone giving rides again at the Virginia airport. His mother was going to visit her sister in that town and Bob asked to go along. From his aunt's house, he hitched a ride out to the airport and got to fly on a Ford tri-motor aircraft. It was a "big deal." The more Bob rode in planes, the more he wanted to do it.

A boy named Wilbur was Bob's best friend from 4th grade through high school. He and Wilbur got along great. They never had a fight and just enjoyed shooting marbles, hunting, and sharing secrets. During the summer they would often hitchhike out to nearby Ely Lake to go swimming. Playing Monopoly was also a favorite pastime for the two boys. They would spend hours purchasing property and building houses and hotels with the fake money.

While in junior high and high school, Bob played several sports including basketball, football, and hockey. He was on the Pee Wee hockey championship team that beat Eveleth in 1936, which was reason to celebrate. However, basketball was his favorite sport and in the tenth grade he was a starter on the Leonidas team. Being involved in all of these sports had taught him to work with others as a team.

Between the love and devotion of his parents, the deep friendships he had formed, and the skills he was learning in the Boy Scouts and sports, Bob was growing up and forming his own personality. All of these things would play a significant role in his life as time went by.

From the age of ten to fifteen, Bob's friendships with the boys in the airplane club deepened. Sometimes Ed's dad

would ask him to do chores like pulling dandelions from the lawn. So Bob and the others would all pitch in to pull the yellow pests and help Ed get it done so they could get back to the basement as soon as possible. When nothing but green was visible in the yard, they hustled into the house and scrambled down the stairs. It was always a competition to see who could get his model done first, yet there was never an argument or fight among those boys.

Sometimes this same group would play hide and seek, marbles, tag, football, hockey, broomball, or shooting rubber band guns in the woods. In the back of Ed's house was a hayfield, where the boys made a little airfield for their model airplanes. After using the old hand mower to cut through the tall grass and weeds, the boys plotted out their runway. Rubber bands were used to crank up the propellers on their planes. After many, many twists of a drill that had a hook on the end of it, the planes were released – and they would fly!

Nearby there stood an old water tower that rose 100-150 feet. More than once, the boys would climb the ladder to the top of that tower, light one of their model airplanes with a match, and watch it go down in flames. It was exciting to be that high off the ground and to watch the model plane ignite, only to become a ball of fire which fortunately burned itself out before it hit the ground. With youthful disregard for their safety, the boys cheered the plane's descent. None of their parents was aware of these dangerous exploits, and it may have remained a secret until now.

Laura Givens had three sisters who lived nearby. At Thanksgiving and Christmas, their families, including five of



Young "Rob" with his mom and dad.

Bob's cousins would come to the Givens house to enjoy the holiday meal.

The enticing aroma of savory meat cooking was mingled with the sweet scent of recently-baked pies or cakes as the guests entered the home. Bob enjoyed the company of his cousins and playing with them.

One summer day, Bob and his parents put on their best clothes and headed over to the nearby park at Ely Lake. Bob's five cousins were there and his aunts and uncles as well, and all were dressed in their finest. It was a special occasion as they had all agreed to hire a professional

photographer for a family picture. Everyone took their place in the group. The photographer assisted them in lining up and several photos were taken of Bob's family that day. Lowering his head, Bob said, "They're all gone now but me—I'm a survivor."

Three Christmases in a row, George Givens bought his son a gun because Bob wanted to hunt as most boys did. He received a small 410-shotgun which he used for hunting partridge, a 12-gauge shotgun for hunting ducks, and a semi-automatic rifle. Bob's dad taught him how to use each of the guns and all of the safety requirements until George thought his son was able to go out on his own.

Between the sixth and eighth grades, Bob and his parents rode the DM&IR (Duluth, Minnesota and Iron Range) train between Leonidas and Eveleth and on to Virginia. It was clean and pleasant and they enjoyed the ride. When Bob turned sixteen, his father bought a car and Bob was able to drive it at times.

One day he drove some of his fellow Boy Scouts out to McKinley Park on Lake Vermilion where the Scouts were sponsoring a fishing contest. There was a limit of eight walleyes. Bob's dad had bought a rod and reel for him, but the reel wasn't working properly. It was so stiff and slow that if Bob got a bite, he just grabbed hold of the line and hand-over-hand hauled the fish in. He caught his limit that day, won an award, and brought the fish home to his mother.

George Givens was one of the fortunate employees at the Oliver Mining company who was permitted to rent a nice five-bedroom house for \$7.50 a month. The mining company assumed all of the repairs on it and it was the home in which Bob grew up.

The Depression years were hard on nearly everyone. The Leonidas School had a school bank in which students were allowed to deposit a nickel, a dime, or whatever they could. Bob had earned a fair amount of money doing various chores over the years and had accumulated \$42 in the school bank. Once during that time, the mine shut down. People in Leonidas and the surrounding area were hard-pressed to make ends meet, including George and Laura Givens. In spite of their meager rent, Bob's parents were forced to use the money their son had in his school bank account. Knowing that it broke their hearts to have to resort to that, Bob willingly gave it to them, and it was a moment of great pride—"A chance to pay them back for all they had done for me," Bob said.

Decisions, Decisions

BY THE TIME HE REACHED THE 11TH GRADE, Bob had apparently spent too much time in the woods and not doing his homework. He wasn't doing well in school. He claimed, "I would'a got an 'A' in football, though." After the year was half over, Bob chose to quit school.

His dad was a WWI veteran and Bob admired him for that. Bob also had a friend whose older brother was in the Navy, serving on the USS *Maryland*. Bob had met the sailor earlier that year. He told Bob all about the Navy and how much he liked it.

Frustrated because he was doing poorly in school, Bob made a decision which he shared with no one. Instead of heading to school one day, he went to the Eveleth Post Office to see the Navy recruiter. After a brief interview, the recruiter gave him the entrance exams. Bob felt he had done a good job. The recruiter came back into the room with the test

results. While the written part of the exam was fine, Bob was stunned into silence as the man told him something he had never imagined about himself: he was colorblind. Then came the chilling words, "I'm sorry, son. We don't want you."

Bob's world spun out of control as he grappled with the unbelievable news. This could not be happening! He had his heart set on joining the Navy. He somehow mustered the strength to rise from the chair. He trudged across the room and out the door. Dragging his feet all the way home, he was one dejected boy.

The look on her son's face when he came through the front door was like nothing Laura Givens had ever seen before.

"What's the matter?" she half-whispered. Bob explained that he had quit school and gone to see the Navy recruiter. He told her that he thought he did fine on the entrance exams. Then he relayed the shocking news that they didn't want him because he was colorblind.

Seeming to take it all in stride, Laura Givens replied, "Well, what are you going to do now? You're not going to lay around here."

"I don't know!" Bob shouted as he fought back the tears that threatened to burst forth. There was no doubt about it now. He knew he had to grow up and face the consequences of his actions.

The Civilian Conservation Corps, known as the CCC, was run by the U.S. Army and the U.S. Forest Service, and it employed many men in the area. Among the things the Corps was responsible for was planting trees, fighting fires, constructing shelters in the parks, and building dams in some of the lakes.

After serious thought and discussion with his family and friends, Bob chose to join the CCC. Some of his friends had joined and it was the only thing he could think of doing where he could be of some use. It turned out to be a positive experience for him. He learned many new things in the Corps, such as the military style of making a bed. There were inspections and mess halls, just like in the army. Bob got his first taste of military life in the CCC—and he liked it. He said, “It kept me out of trouble and made a man out of me.”

Each member of the Civilian Conservation Corps was paid \$30 a month. \$7.50 was paid over the table for Bob’s pocket. \$7.50 went into savings for when he got out, and \$15 went to his parents. Bob was assigned to Camp 3702 by Luna Lake at nearby Chisholm, Minnesota.

Most of the time his job consisted of planting Norway pines as part of the Superior National Forest.

The bad news was that you could only remain in the CCC for six months. They tried to give as many people as possible the opportunity to make some money. Reluctantly, when his half-year was over, Bob returned home for the rest of the summer.

In the fall of 1941, when the leaves bid farewell to the trees and began to swirl around the streets, school bells started ringing. With another surprise move, Bob announced, “I’m going back to school.” He repeated the 11th grade and completed it.

In the summer of 1942 Bob had to get a job. He was hired by the DM&IR railroad as part of a track gang. Their job was to tamp down the railroad ties to keep the tracks level. They used a shovel to push crushed rock under the ties (a guy who

did this work was known as a "Gandy Dancer.") Bob was paid \$4.44 a day and worked there only a month before deciding to try to get a job at the Oliver Mine. His father had a good record there and they told Bob, "If you're as good as him, we'll give you a job." He worked in the mine for the next two months.

It was early September when as always, the school bells started ringing. Bob had thought long and hard about his education and now felt that he was finished with school. His persistent desire to be in the service had been burning inside him. One day as his mother had just finished washing the dishes, Bob strolled into the kitchen and addressed her with, "Come on, Mom - let's go to Duluth and talk to the military recruiters there." He was still hopeful that perhaps they could use him in some way.

When they got to the Armory, they saw that tables were set up along the perimeter of a large room. Recruiters from all branches of the service were there, and Bob was hoping for a miracle. The words of the Navy recruiter more than a year previously telling him that they didn't want him were as clear as the day Bob had first heard them.

As he walked along the row of tables, the recruiter from the Air Corps shouted, "We need one good man!"

Sullenly, Bob walked up to him and said, "I have always wanted to fly. I was in a club and for years I made model airplanes. I got to ride in a plane twice, but you don't want me because I'm colorblind."

The recruiter's eyes got big and he exclaimed, "Oh yes we do! A guy who's colorblind can spot camouflage on the ground way better than a guy with normal vision!"

In disbelief, Bob stiffened as both of his hands flew up in the air.

“Mister, you’ve got your man!” he shouted. With the greatest amount of surprise at this amazing turn of events, Bob and his mother were filled with joy. He signed on the dotted line and proudly announced, “I made it!”

