

MEMORIALIZING

Colonel Einar Axel Malmstrom

By Troy A. Hallsell | Photography Provided

In 1949 the Air Force decided to rename Great Falls AFB in honor of a Montana war hero. Numerous veterans and professional organizations nominated Jens W. Holm, a B-29 Superfortress pilot who was shot down over Tokyo and later executed by the Japanese military during World War II. Others recommended Cpl Donald C. Meagher, a Great Falls High School graduate, for his heroism during the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. Other names proposed offered no military or heroic connection, such as Gateway to Alaska, Monalaska, High-line, Vigilante, and Last Chance AFB. Despite this community input, the Air Force paused renaming Great Falls AFB since none of the proposed names met the criteria set forth by Air Force regulations at the time.

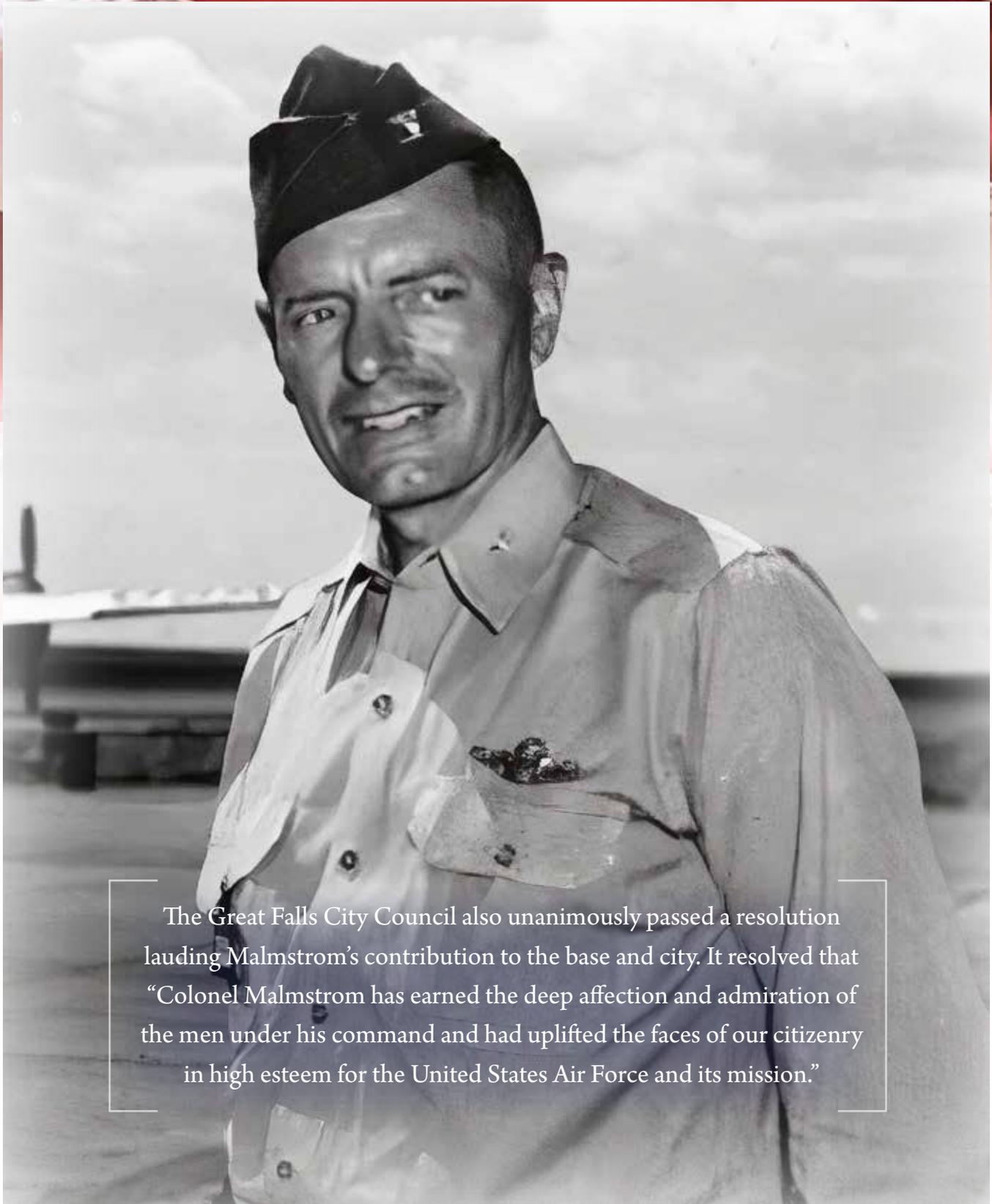
In the summer of 1954, Col. Lester S. Harris, the 407th Strategic Fighter Wing commander, began the memorialization process again. He believed a name change was necessary for two reasons. First, he noted that “the local population usually refers to this base as ‘East Base’ or ‘The Air Base’ instead of Great Falls Air Force Base.” Renaming the base after a decorated pilot and war hero would “enhance its prestige, and in turn, the prestige of our personnel.” Second, this change would remedy a long-standing safety concern. Since Great Falls AFB and the municipal airport atop Gore Hill shared similar call signs and frequencies, pilots frequently confused the two when they requested landing instructions.

Colonel Harris submitted his proposal to rename Great Falls AFB after Brig Gen Jesse D. Auton, a seasoned fighter pilot who died in a plane crash outside Offutt Air Force Base, Nebraska, on March 30, 1952. Even though Gen Curtis E. LeMay, the commander of Strategic Air Command, supported Auton’s nomination, the 407 SFW changed

direction in August 1954 following the death of its deputy commander Col Einar Axel Malmstrom.

Malmstrom was born in Chicago, Illinois, on July 14, 1907, to Swedish immigrant parents and became interested in aviation and the military at an early age. He enlisted in the Washington National Guard in 1929 and, two years later, earned his commission as a Second Lieutenant. He entered flight school shortly after that. Malmstrom was called to active duty in September 1940, and by the time he arrived in Europe in 1943, he wore the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. He commanded the 356th Fighter Group based out of RAF Martlesham Heath, United Kingdom. On April 24, 1944, Malmstrom’s P-47 Thunderbolt fighter plane was shot down over France, and he spent 13 months as a German prisoner of war. Malmstrom returned to the US in May 1945. He arrived at Great Falls AFB in February 1954 as the 407 SFW’s deputy commander.

On the morning of August 21, 1954, Colonel Malmstrom prepared for a flight to March AFB, California. Airman David Quirk spoke with Malmstrom at the base operations terminal before takeoff and asked him if it was a bad day to fly, given the fog. “Malmstrom said, ‘Oh, the fog is ground fog, and once you’re up 200 feet, it’s clear,’” Quirk recalled. After Malmstrom climbed into the cockpit of a T-33A Shooting Star, Quirk “gave him the takeoff salute,” and Malmstrom “gave it full throttle and started down the runway.” At 08:34L, Malmstrom’s plane took off from Great Falls AFB. At 08:40L, he advised the base tower that he was climbing to 13,000 feet, but only one minute later, his aircraft crashed in a field approximately two miles east of the municipal airport. He died upon impact.



The Great Falls City Council also unanimously passed a resolution lauding Malmstrom's contribution to the base and city. It resolved that "Colonel Malmstrom has earned the deep affection and admiration of the men under his command and had uplifted the faces of our citizenry in high esteem for the United States Air Force and its mission."

Malmstrom Photo: Colonel Einar Axel Malmstrom was the 407th Strategic Fighter Wing's deputy commander. Despite only arriving at Great Falls AFB in February 1954, his lengthy career in aviation and leadership made an impact on the wing and the men under his command before he died on August 21, 1954.

The 407 SFW formed an Investigation Board to examine the causes of Malmstrom's crash. It concluded that the most likely cause was "a sudden acute physical disorder such as a stroke, cerebral hemorrhage, or heart attack, which could have caused immediate loss of control of the aircraft." Crash site investigators noted, "Fragments of canopy and canopy frame were found in craters of point of initial impact. Ejection mechanism also recovered from this area and found not to have been used and in all probability would have fired properly if used." That an experienced pilot like Malmstrom did not eject from the aircraft suggested a medical issue led to his death.

In the weeks following, Colonel Malmstrom's name emerged as the preferred candidate to rename Great Falls AFB after. In a letter to wing leadership, the manager of the Great Falls Area Chamber of Commerce suggested the base halt General Auton's memorialization and pointed to his lack of association with Great Falls AFB. He wrote, "We have no doubt that Auton was a very distinguished air force officer, but he was unknown to all of us here in Montana." The Great Falls City Council also unanimously passed a resolution lauding Malmstrom's contribution to the base and city. It resolved that "Colonel Malmstrom has earned the deep affection and admiration of the men under his command and had uplifted the faces of our citizenry in high esteem for the United

States Air Force and its mission." On base Airmen praised his leadership. Airman Quirk remembered Malmstrom as "a very personable, friendly man who rarely, if ever, looked down on anyone, including young officers and enlisted men." This support led Col Klair Back to suggest the Fifteenth Air Force commander rescind General Auton's nomination and support Malmstrom's instead.

By the spring of 1955, the Air Force began the process of renaming Great Falls AFB after Colonel Malmstrom. Support for his nomination came from local, state, and federal officials such as the Rotary Club of Great Falls, Montana Aeronautics Commission, and Congressman



Airmen march past the reviewing stand during the Malmstrom AFB dedication ceremony on June 15, 1956.



Commanding officers of the fighter groups of the 8th Air Force in 1944; Malmstrom is fifth from the right standing.



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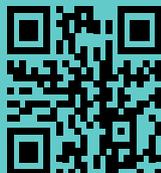


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Orvin B. Fjare. On September 1955, the Secretary of the Air Force notified Col Murray A. Bywater that he approved the wing's request to rename Great Falls AFB after Malmstrom. The name change went into effect on October 1, 1955, with a formal dedication ceremony to follow.

On June 15, 1956, the 407 SFW held a dedication ceremony to commemorate Colonel Malmstrom as the base's new namesake. Wing Chaplain David E. Rathjen conducted a brief invocation, followed by Colonel Bywater, who introduced the event's two speakers: Maj Gen H.K. Mooney, Deputy Commander, Fifteenth Air Force, and Congressman Fjare. General Mooney praised Malmstrom as a "gallant gentleman and a sincere friend" and could "think of no finer tribute than to give his name to this rapidly growing Air Force installation, which adds considerably to the potency of our national defense."

Following the speakers' remarks, Airmen conducted a parade and review. Eighty-six commissioned and enlisted Airmen, dressed in their summer class "A" uniforms, paraded past the reviewing stand with Colonel Malmstrom's family and other dignitaries. Alongside the parade-in-review, aircrews with the 407 SFW, 29th Fighter Interceptor Squadron, and 186th Fighter Interceptor Squadron flew a combined 43 KB-29 Super Fortresses, F-84F Thunderstreaks, F-89 Scorpions, F-94C Starfires, and T-33s as part of an aerial salute. During a reception at



Major General H. K. Mooney shakes hands with Colonel Murray A. Bywater, the 407th Strategic Fighter Wing Commander.



Congressman Orvin B. Fjare speaks with Colonel Bywater.

the officer's mess hall later that evening, Kathryn Malmstrom, Colonel Malmstrom's wife, unveiled a portrait of her late husband. Afterward, R.F. Kitchingman presented her with a miniature portrait to remember her husband.

The next day the *Great Falls Tribune* lauded the Air Force's decision to rename Great Falls AFB. The paper argued that this action was not about one man but the "Tradition of Service." Citing Malmstrom's commendation, the *Tribune* highlighted "His outstanding devotion to duty, leadership ability, and self-sacrifice." Malmstrom was "part of an illustrious tradition of American fighting men who have served in the forces which guard our country and our way of life," though his "death came in what is called a 'routine mission.' This may well remind us that sacrifice and devotion to duty are not rendered in war alone." **SMT**



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The ideas expressed in this article do not represent the 341st Missile Wing, United States Air Force, or Department of Defense.