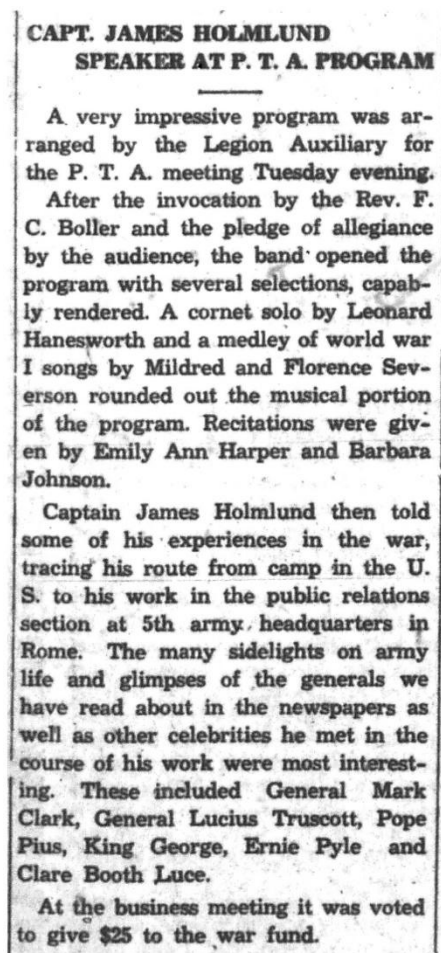


# 1945 November 12-18

## James Holmlund: Soldier, PR Man, Journalist



(*Bangor Independent*, 1945 November 15, page 1)

**Captain James Holmlund of Bangor** had a lot to talk about. If we could reconstruct it, his story might have sounded something like this.

James O. Holmlund was born on September 6, 1918, in Bangor, Wisconsin, to Olaf O. and Ruth (Erickson) Holmlund.<sup>1</sup>

Olaf Olson Holmlund was born in Hamar, Norway, in 1884. He started in the cabinet-making trade. When Olaf Holmlund came to the United States in 1904 to escape the military draft, he was met at the Midway railroad station by a cousin who was already living in Holmen. Holmlund worked as a farmhand, a logger, and a factory worker in Beloit. After an operation for appendicitis in 1907, Holmlund started working for a funeral director/undertaker/furniture store owner in West Salem. Holmlund would later move to Bangor when he purchased the funeral home business there about one year before his son,

James, was born. He expanded the business to include sales and service for clocks and watches, appliances, radios, silverware, diamonds, picture framing, electrical supplies, paint, and garden plants, in addition to being the funeral director and undertaker for Bangor until 1945 when he was forced to retire due to Parkinson's disease. Holmlund's first wife, Ruth Erickson, eight years his junior, died in 1923. He and his second wife, Effie Bosshard, divorced in 1931. Holmlund married a third time, to Amanda (Kittelton) Casterline, in 1936.<sup>2</sup>

James Holmlund lost his mother when he was five years old. He recalled that his mother was often sick, so a succession of young women ("hired girls") were employed to operate a household that included James and his three younger siblings. After his father came down with influenza, Holmlund's mother contracted the disease while caring for him, causing her death in December 1925.<sup>3</sup>

Holmlund's father married the widow Effie (Kremmer) Bosshard in 1927. Effie brought a discipline inspired by her German heritage, and she assigned chores to the children. She had a son, John, from her first marriage, and there were some tensions between the step-siblings. James recalled years later being awakened by his father and stepmother arguing during the night.<sup>4</sup>

Following his divorce from Effie, Olaf Holmlund courted a woman who was eighteen years his junior, Amanda (Kittelton) Casterline, the widow of the West Salem pharmacist Boyd Casterline. Casterline had worked at [Hull House in Chicago](#), at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, and she was the librarian for the Bangor Village Library. She was also a Red Cross volunteer, Girl Scout leader, a member of the Women's Civic Club, and Sunday school teacher at the Baptist Church.<sup>5</sup> When Olaf Holmlund and Amanda Casterline were married in 1936, they took a six-week trip to Norway, leaving eighteen-year-old James in charge of the store and funeral business.<sup>6</sup> James and his siblings considered Amanda as almost a sister rather than a stepmother.<sup>7</sup>

Despite some turmoil at home, the multi-talented James Holmlund excelled at Bangor High School. The Dramatic Club had 29 members, and Holmlund was elected the president.<sup>8</sup> He was chosen as the king of the Junior Prom.<sup>9</sup> Holmlund was a singer who performed at school-related events,<sup>10</sup> a member of the band, and also on the forensics team.<sup>11</sup> As an athlete, Holmlund played on the basketball team that earned a trip to the Class C state tournament during his senior year.<sup>12</sup> He also was named to the Wisconsin all-state basketball team and was an outstanding baseball player.<sup>13</sup> Holmlund graduated from Bangor High School in May 1936, along with 23 classmates.<sup>14</sup>

The elder Holmlund thought his oldest son should follow his footsteps in the funeral and merchandise business. James Holmlund hated the thought of becoming a funeral director. His stepmother, Amanda, convinced his father to send the boy to college instead.<sup>15</sup>

Holmlund enrolled at [Luther College](#) in Decorah, Iowa.<sup>16</sup> While he was in college, Holmlund sang in a baritone voice that would serve him well in future radio and television work.<sup>17</sup> One of his gigs was at a [La Crosse Concert Band](#) performance in Riverside Park in the summer of 1939.<sup>18</sup> During the summer, Holmlund also played outfield for the Bangor non-professional baseball team.<sup>19</sup> Holmlund graduated from Luther College in May 1940.<sup>20</sup>

Like thousands of other young American men in 1940, Holmlund had to register with the Selective Service in October 1940. When National Guard units in La Crosse and Sparta were called up to active service, Holmlund was able to move into a job vacated by one of those men. Starting in November 1940, he was a writer for the *Sparta Herald* and *Monroe County Democrat* newspapers for seven months.<sup>21</sup>

When Uncle Sam called on Holmlund to serve in the spring of 1941, his minister suggested that he apply for conscientious objector status. Olaf Holmlund, who had ironically left his native Norway to avoid military service, called that idea "nonsense."<sup>22</sup>

On June 20, 1941, James Holmlund entered the United States Army.<sup>23</sup> Holmlund was part of a contingent of 40-50 area inductees who gathered at the La Crosse Post Office before heading to the Milwaukee Road railroad station in La Crosse for the trip to the induction center in Milwaukee. Hundreds of friends and relatives were at the depot to see them off, including Holmlund's tearful stepmother, Amanda, and his sister, Virginia. When the train made a stop to pick up passengers in Tomah, Holmlund's girlfriend waved at him from the platform.<sup>24</sup>

The induction center at Milwaukee processed this group the same as it did thousands of others during the war. Physical exams were the first order of business. Holmlund later wrote, "There's nothing like parading around nude in a large auditorium with hundreds of other males." Those who were accepted took an oath to serve in the United States armed forces and defend the United States Constitution.<sup>25</sup>

Another train ride took Holmlund to [Camp Grant, Illinois](#), for more processing. There the inductees took an IQ test to help determine their assignment. They were also issued World War I-era wool caps and pants. It was during this time that the wife of the doctor in Bangor called the post commander, a colonel who was a personal friend, in an effort to get Holmlund assigned to the post band as a trombonist. This personal intercession failed, and Holmlund was soon on a troop train for [Fort Knox, Kentucky](#).<sup>26</sup>

This was the start of a one-year stay at Fort Knox, beginning on June 23, 1941. Holmlund wrote that Fort Knox was memorable for the summer heat and wet clay saturated by heavy rains as thousands of personnel matriculated through the base. In addition to his training, drilling, and other duties, Holmlund sang for chapel services and played on his unit's basketball team. His lone solo singing performance with the camp jazz band on a Louisville radio station was heard back in Bangor.<sup>27</sup> This was in August 1941 when Holmlund was in his third week of training to be a radio operator.<sup>28</sup> The soldiers were paid \$21 per month; they later got a raise to \$30. Holmlund also trained as a tank driver.<sup>29</sup>

According to federal law, military inductees were to serve one year. Pearl Harbor changed all that. On December 7, 1941, Holmlund was on KP (kitchen police) duty, with his arms in water up to his elbows, when he heard the news about the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.<sup>30</sup> Now nearly everyone was in for the duration of the war.

In early 1942, Holmlund decided to apply for [Officer Candidate School](#) (OCS) because it would mean an increase in pay to \$166 a month.<sup>31</sup> He was accepted and graduated from OCS as a second lieutenant in June 1942 at Fort Knox.<sup>32</sup>

After receiving his officer's commission on June 13, Holmlund was granted a one-week leave to visit Bangor before reporting to the [756th Tank Battalion](#) at [Fort Lewis, Washington](#).<sup>33</sup>



2nd Lt. James O. Holmlund

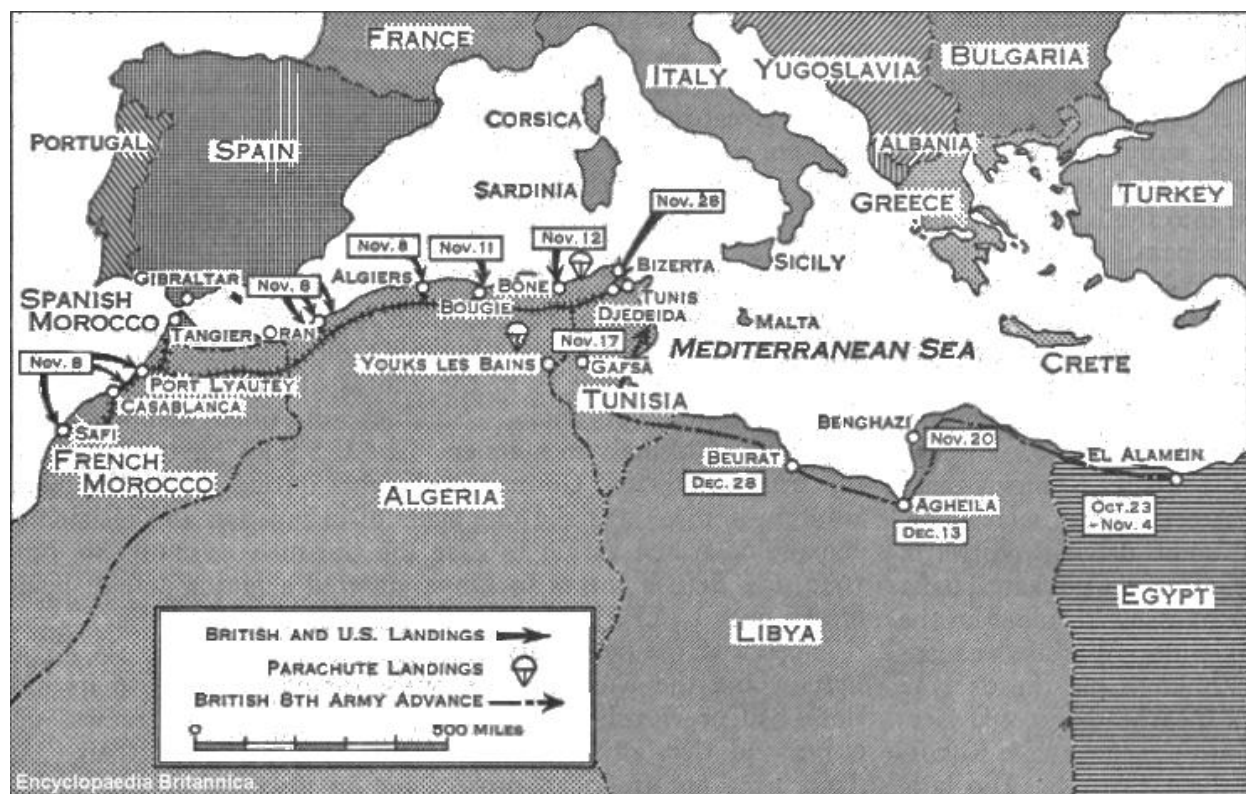
(*La Crosse Tribune*, 1942 June 24, page 4.

Lt. Holmlund's assignment was battalion communications officer. His unit went through amphibious warfare training at Fort Lewis and at [Ford Ord, California](#). Then the battalion hauled their tanks and equipment cross-country on trains to [Camp Pickett, Virginia](#). His tank battalion was attached to the [3rd Infantry Division](#) and prepared for the [invasion of North Africa](#).

In November 1942, part of his battalion landed near [Casablanca, Morocco](#), in North Africa. They were in combat for three days.<sup>34</sup> Lt. Holmlund was in the group that was left behind in [Fort Dix, New Jersey](#). They would not ship overseas to North Africa until January 1943.<sup>35</sup> While their brethren were fighting in North Africa, the approximately 200 "left-behinds," including Holmlund, enjoyed all that New York City had to offer after their daily duties on Staten Island were done.<sup>36</sup>

The good times ended when this group boarded the ocean liner [S.S. Santa Elena](#), along with a few thousand other troops, for the 11-day voyage across the Atlantic Ocean to North Africa. The men in the convoy had an uneventful trip, except for seasickness, boredom, crowded conditions, and salt water showers, before arriving at Casablanca. Upon arrival, they learned that their comrades in the rest of the

battalion had suffered no fatalities in their three days of fighting.<sup>37</sup> By this time, the battlefront had moved on to Tunisia.<sup>38</sup>



North African campaign

([The Robinson Library](#))

Holmlund and his unit spent ten months in Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia. Because of 125-degree heat, the hours between 11 a.m. and 2:00 p.m. were "siesta time." It never rained. They took showers under a perforated metal water can hung from a cork tree, and slept on the ground with camouflage netting overhead to block out the sun. While they were in Tunis, the boredom was briefly relieved by a USO show featuring [Bob Hope](#) and [Frances Langford](#).<sup>39</sup>

While he was in North Africa, Holmlund carried with him "an illustrated folder of the La Crosse area" that had been sent in a gift box to servicemen by the La Crosse Chamber of Commerce in November 1942.<sup>40</sup>

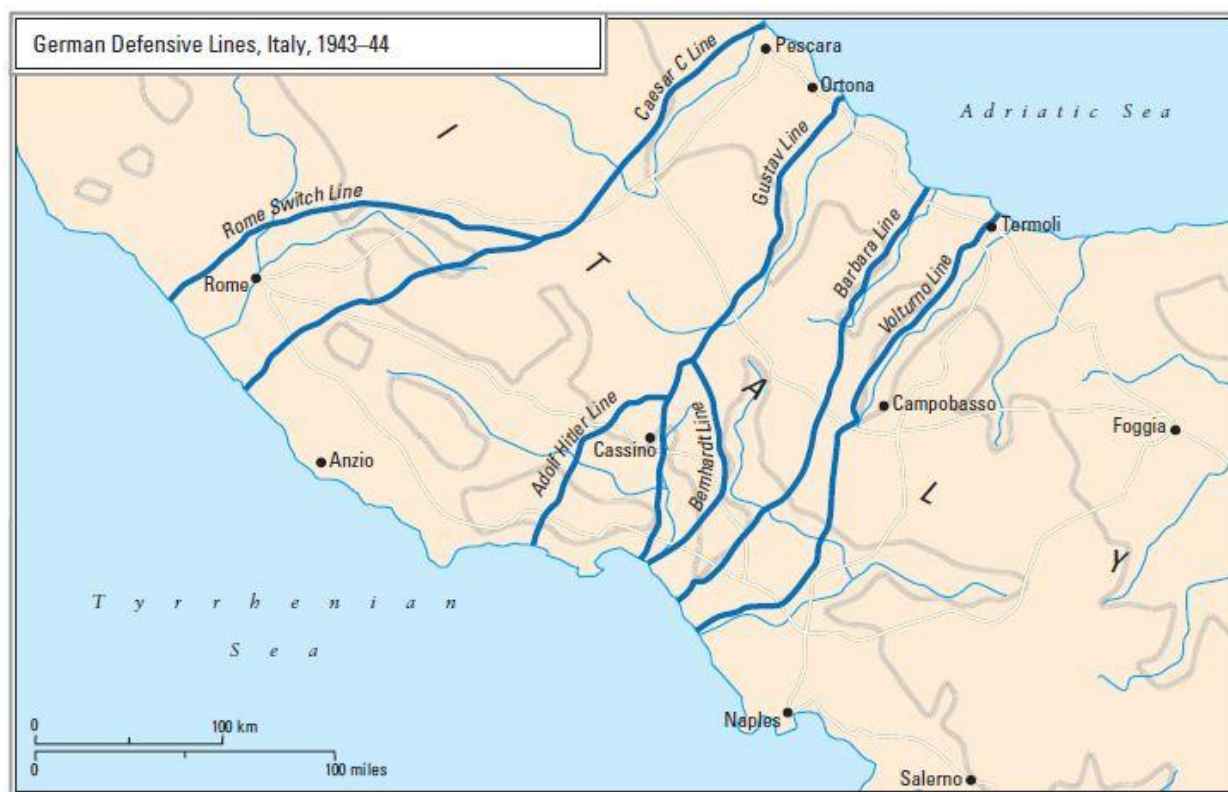
After a relatively uneventful stay in North Africa, the 756th Tank Battalion was attached to the 45th Infantry Division for the invasion of [Salerno, Italy](#), in September 1943. The 756th landed one day after the invasion was spearheaded on September 9 by the 36th Infantry Division. They advanced out of the beachhead to capture the city of Naples.<sup>41</sup> His tank battalion saw its first action in Italy on September 20 near Oliveto Citto. The next morning, Holmlund could see the hill dotted with the bodies of American infantrymen.<sup>42</sup>



Rainy season started in Italy, so the advance was slowed by mud. Disease also started to infect his unit. Holmlund himself was struck down by infectious hepatitis near the Volturno River. He was eventually evacuated to a field hospital where he shared a tent with men wounded in battle. Holmlund was then hospitalized for six weeks in Naples.<sup>43</sup>

At this time, the 756th Tank Battalion was being converted to medium and heavier tanks and training for further action in the Monte Cassino area of operations. The commander arranged a transfer for Holmlund because the unit was going back into combat and Holmlund was still hospitalized. Holmlund later learned that his unit lost 17 out of their 54 tanks, and 97 men killed, wounded, or captured in their first day or so of fighting at Monte Cassino.<sup>44</sup>

Holmlund tried but failed to get into Special Services, the entertainment corps for the Army. Holmlund then convinced a ranking officer that he could be a communications liaison for war correspondents. This temporary assignment later became official. One of the first correspondents he worked with was the famed [Ernie Pyle](#).<sup>45</sup>



American troops invaded Italy at Salerno (lower right), and then fought their way north up the Italian peninsula. Anzio is in the left-center, and Rome is north of that.

([TheHistoryreader.com](http://TheHistoryreader.com))

Holmlund landed at [Anzio](#) in January 1944 in an Army [DUKW](#) with a radio transmitter crew. He was below decks talking to [Will Lang](#), a correspondent for *Time* magazine, when the side of the vessel bulged

in from a bomb near-miss. The DUKW also carried [Don Whitehead](#) of the Associated Press. They used a gasoline-powered generator to send news reports to Naples.<sup>46</sup>

The landing at Anzio, on the west coast of Italy, was an operation designed to outflank the stubborn German resistance on the Gustav-Cassino Line. The landing was a surprise and was virtually unopposed. But the American and British forces were slow to seize the offensive initiative, and this allowed the Germans to rush in reinforcements to surround the beachhead. German artillery could hit any part of the enclave, and daily German air raids made every part of the beachhead the front lines. Ferocious German counterattacks tried to push the Allies back into the sea.

At Anzio, Army public relations staff and the civilian press pool bunked together in a former medical clinic they jokingly referred to as the Villa of Virtue. Besides Eric Severeid, who had a long, distinguished career with CBS, the group also included famed Army cartoonist [Bill Mauldin](#), and newspaper correspondent Ernie Pyle. Holmlund and his staff also shipped camera film to New York for [Life](#) magazine photographer [Margaret Bourke-White](#).<sup>47</sup> Pulitzer Prize winner [Daniel De Luce](#) of the Associated Press and [Slim Aarons](#), later a famous photographer, were also part of the group.<sup>48</sup>

One of those German bombing raids on March 16, 1944, earned 1st Lt. James Holmlund a Purple Heart medal for being wounded in combat when falling debris injured him in the legs.<sup>49</sup> Holmlund, one of five people injured in this incident while they were sleeping, later described his injuries as minor "lower leg abrasions from the building partially falling down." Ernie Pyle, who was on the upper floor of the building, escaped injury because he was up and dressed; "a whole wall" had fallen on his bed.<sup>50</sup>

On April 23, 1944, a six-man crew under the command of Holmlund broadcast from radio station JJRP within the Anzio beachhead. The station was situated on the second floor of a ten-room villa that used to be owned by an Italian banker. NBC reporter Ralph Howard went on the air shortly after 8:00 a.m. Central War Time and said, "The sound of guns can be heard in the distance and the roof trembles under the impact of exploding shells. It is the first time in history a broadcasting station has been erected and put into operation this close to the front line."<sup>51</sup> Also broadcasting from the radio station were CBS radio correspondent [Eric Severeid](#) and [John W. Vandercook](#) of NBC. A short-wave transmitter beamed the signal to New York where it was relayed to the rest of the United States. Holmlund later said that hearing a technician in the United States state, "Coming in fine, Anzio," was one of the most exciting moments of the war for him.<sup>52</sup>

In four months at Anzio, the Allies suffered more than 29,200 combat casualties and 37,000 non-combat casualties, including 4,400 killed in action and 6,800 missing or taken prisoner.<sup>53</sup>

The troops trapped at Anzio were eventually able to break out and link up with Allied forces advancing from the south. The Germans had to withdraw to avoid being encircled, and the Allies captured Rome in early June 1944.

Two days after the liberation of Rome, Holmlund attended a press conference by [Pope Pius XII](#) on June 5, 1944. Holmlund was seen in a photo of the event published in *Time* magazine and other publications at the time.<sup>54</sup>



**Five Bangor, Wis., Soldiers** holding a reunion, with 1st. Lieut. James O. Holmlund, Fifth Army public relations officer, as host to his fellow townsmen at a coffee and doughnut party in a villa on the Fifth Army beachhead in Italy. Left to right they are: Corp. Clyde O. Pierce, medical corps; Corp. Jack L. Haak, anti-aircraft; Corp. Reuben H. Filter, artillery; Corp. Donald G. Diesburg, armored infantry; and Lieut. Holmlund. (APS Photo from Fifth Army).

Three other men from Bangor were at Anzio but could not make it to the party. One of them, Stanley Lunde, was later killed in action during the breakout from Anzio.<sup>55</sup>

(*La Crosse Tribune*, 1944 May 8, page 1)

1st Lt. James Holmlund was rewarded for his work at Anzio. He was awarded the Bronze Star for meritorious service in June 1944.<sup>56</sup> The medal was personally presented by [Lt. General Lucian K. Truscott, Jr.](#), commander of the Fifth Army, later that year.<sup>57</sup> He was promoted to captain in the summer of 1944.<sup>58</sup> Then-commander of the Fifth Army, [Lt. General Mark Clark](#), personally pinned the captain's bars on Holmlund's shoulders on July 12, 1944.<sup>59</sup>

His work in public relations for the Fifth Army allowed Holmlund to meet other well-known people of the era. Among them were Britain's [King George VI](#), and he interviewed Senator [Clare Boothe Luce](#) while she was on an inspection tour in Italy.<sup>60</sup>



Like many soldiers, he brought home some souvenirs from the war. He was able to reach over the side of a jeep and snatch a field telephone left along the road by retreating German soldiers. Holmlund also managed to liberate a small swivel chair from Adolf Hitler's home in [Berchtesgaden](#).<sup>61</sup>

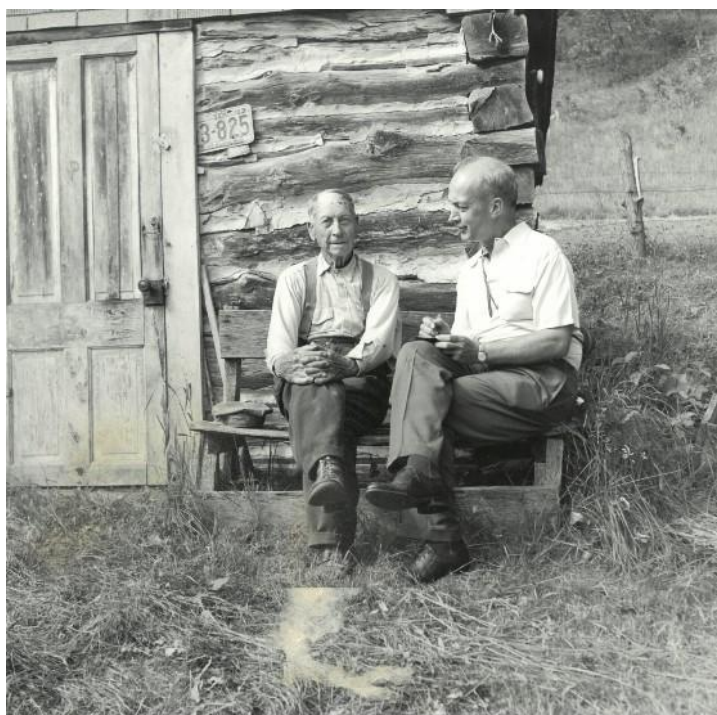
Holmlund left Italy in September 1945.<sup>62</sup> Just before that, he had been named the Information and Education officer for his group of 5,500 soldiers, including 600 WACs, that were coming home on the [S. Vulcania](#), an Italian luxury liner that had been converted into a troopship.<sup>63</sup> His ship docked in the United States on October 4.<sup>64</sup>

By October 11, Holmlund was back in Milwaukee, where his military journey had started, to get his discharge from the United States Army.<sup>65</sup>

Holmlund returned to Bangor. Relatives gathered at the Holmlund home to welcome back the young officer on October 14.<sup>66</sup> He spoke about his wartime experiences at the Women's Civic Club<sup>67</sup> and the local P.T.A.<sup>68</sup>

Then, like all discharged service personnel, Holmlund had to deal with reestablishing a life in the civilian world. His first postwar job was at radio station WDW in Tuscola, Illinois. He wrote commercials, sang on radio shows, and was a disc jockey. A few months later, he went to Milwaukee to write news for radio station WTMJ. His next job was as program manager for WDLB in Marshfield.<sup>69</sup>

While he was working at Marshfield, Holmlund married Naomi Roy, a graduate of Sparta High School, in August 1948.<sup>70</sup> They would have a son and a daughter together.<sup>71</sup>

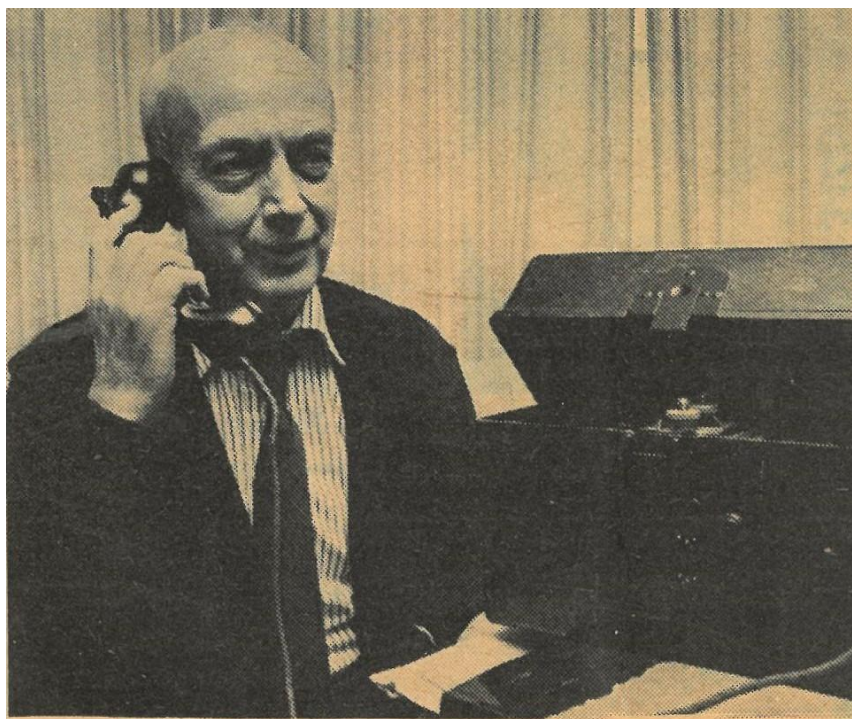


Jim Holmlund, (right) in 1965

(La Crosse Public Library Archives)

They moved to La Crosse in February 1949 when Jim Holmlund started working for the *La Crosse Tribune* newspaper as a copyreader. He later became a general assignment reporter and wrote articles for the newspaper until 1968.<sup>72</sup>

After leaving the newspaper, Holmlund established Independent News and Features. He did freelance writing and photography for area newspapers, wire services, magazines, radio, and television stations.<sup>73</sup> Some of his work appeared on the *Today Show* and *Good Morning America*.<sup>74</sup> He wrote a weekly column for the *La Crosse County Countryman* in the early 1980s.



**Jim Holmlund, Freelance Writer and Photographer**

(*Coulee Gazette*, 1978 January 25, page 4)

Holmlund also joined the Army Reserve and retired with the rank of Lt. Colonel in 1970. He was a member of the Reserve Officers Association and was awarded their Ben Franklin Award for Excellence in journalism.<sup>75</sup>

His baritone voice was heard by many when he performed in his church choir and as a soloist at local events.<sup>76</sup>

James O. Holmlund died on April 4, 2001, at the age of 82, at the Bethany Riverside Facility in La Crosse. After funeral services at the First Congregational Church in La Crosse, the Bangor boy went home for the final time, to be buried in the Fairview Cemetery with his father and his "three mothers."<sup>77</sup>

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