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# Bill Holden kept one secret to the very end

## Golden Boy

The untold story of William Holden

*While he was filming "The Day the World Ended" in 1980, it was obvious that William Holden was becoming dangerous not only to himself but to those around him. A psychologist was hired and Mr. Holden continued to see him after the filming. Two government agents visited the psychologist's office and explained that Mr. Holden "had performed certain international services for the United States," of which he should not speak during therapy. After Mr. Holden's death in November, 1981, director Billy Wilder commented: "... To be killed by a bottle of vodka and a night table — what a lousy fadeout for a great guy."*

By Bob Thomas

Production for "The Day the World Ended" (1980) began at Kona on the island of Hawaii.

Congenial during the social times, Bill Holden seemed tentative and uneasy on the movie locations. His morale leaped when actress Stefanie Powers arrived in Hawaii.

After she returned to California, the actor seemed to withdraw into himself, cloaked in melancholy. His fellow workers Jacqueline Bisset and Paul Newman feared he wanted to return to his condominium and drink. When Miss Bisset saw Bill Holden in a bar with a glass of wine in his hand, her heart sank.

His drinking worsened. He spent hours alone in his dressing room. When he emerged, he was uncharacteristically loud and boisterous. He arrived on time and knew his lines, but his diction was blurred, his movements unsure. One day when the company was filming atop a cliff, Bill Holden playfully pushed two of the actors toward the brink. No one fell, but the incident sobered everyone present, except him.

Director James Goldstone grew increasingly concerned, not only for the progress of the production but for the safety of the actor and other members of the company. Ava RReady, who was playing a role in the film, told the director about a close friend who was an expert in crisis counseling and the treatment of alcoholics and drug addicts. He was Michael Jay Klassman, a psychologist and therapist who was also an expert in psychodrama and had conducted performances in Los Angeles theaters.

"Call him," the desperate Mr. Goldstone told

the actress. "Get him over here."

Michael Klassman flew from Los Angeles to the island of Hawaii.

Producer Irwin Allen asked him not to identify himself to Mr. Holden for fear of upsetting him, and for the first two days, Mr. Klassman merely observed on the movie set. By the third day he had made his conclusion: William Holden was in a severe stage of alcoholism. Mr. Klassman's overwhelming impression was not that Mr. Holden seemed to be a roaring drunk, but that he was a "little boy lost."

Mr. Klassman's relationship with Bill Holden remained casual for the remaining two weeks at the Hawaii location. The company returned to Hollywood for additional sequences at the Burbank Studios and MGM.

Mr. Klassman remained on the set to observe Mr. Holden.

One morning, a second assistant director whispered to assistant director Andy Stone: "I think we've got a problem with Bill Holden." Mr. Stone went to Mr. Holden's motor home and found him totally drunk.

Mr. Klassman stepped forward, telling producer Allen and director Goldstone: "I won't continue unless you let me take over. This man is a danger to himself and to the rest of the company. He must be hospitalized — now."

On the first night at St. John's detoxification unit in Santa Monica, Mr. Klassman identified himself to Mr. Holden, fearing the star would rage about being spied upon. Instead, Bill Holden merely grinned. "You're good," he said. "You know what I'm about, don't you?"

"Supposing I had walked up to you in Hawaii," Mr. Klassman said, "and I had said, 'Hi, I'm Michael Klassman, I'm a psychologist and drug counselor, and I'm here to help you.' What would you have said?"

"Go — yourself."

"That's what I thought."

Bill Holden consented to go into therapy with Mr. Klassman. "I'll tell you right now there are certain areas of my life that I can't talk about," he said to Mr. Klassman at the outset of their therapy sessions. "Over the years I have done certain things, performed certain missions for the government that are so secret that I can't talk about them to anyone, even you. So don't ask me."

The CIA connection. Shortly after Mr. Klassman began treating William Holden for alcoholism, the psychologist was visited at his Beverly Hills office by two well-dressed, fully credentialed men from the federal government. They explained that Mr. Holden was a public figure who had performed certain international services for the United States, and they inquired about Mr. Klassman's association with him. Mr. Klassman explained he was a licensed marriage, family and child counselor, and he outlined his proposed treatment of the actor's drinking problem. The government men seemed satisfied, and they left.

Bill Holden maintained his secrecy on governmental matters during the months of therapy.

"I'm telling you intimacies that I have never shared with anyone," Bill Holden often told Mr. Klassman. But

drunk or sober — and Mr. Klassman saw him both ways — Bill Holden never talked about the CIA. On a few occasions he mentioned memories that seemed to cause him great pain. He spoke of being in the Congo and witnessing the beheading of two black leaders he had known. He started to mention a tragedy in Kuala Lumpur, then said, "But I can't talk about that."

He had traveled to countries of Asia and Africa before they were approved for American tourists, and was able to meet heads of state wherever he went. It seemed logical that he could have been the carrier of official information. But Bill Holden was too much of a patriot to divulge such things to anyone. Mr. Klassman believed that the hoarding of those painful secrets contributed to the actor's unrest.

The therapy sessions began after the conclusion of "The Day the World Ended" and continued intensely for the next four months, sporadically thereafter. The pair met at Bill Holden's Palm Springs house and sometimes talked for 16 hours at a time.

In their early sessions, Mr. Holden was indeed elusive. Mr. Klassman learned to recognize the star's "automatic face," the one he could flash so winningly in movie roles and television interviews. During their encounters in Palm Springs, the therapist purposely worked long hours, realizing that he needed to break down the barriers that Mr. Holden had created during a lifetime of denial. Often the breakthrough came at 3 in the morning.

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