

This Panther Pilot's Combat Mission Was So Secret He Couldn't Talk About it For 40 Years

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By Dave Kindy

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Driving winds blew blinding snow across the deck of the U.S. Navy aircraft carrier *Oriskany* on November 18, 1952. Inside the cockpit of his Grumman F9F-5 Panther, Lt. Royce Williams watched the blizzard while waiting for the signal to take off from the *Essex*-class carrier as it plowed through the Sea of Japan. Snow was not uncommon at that time of year along the upper coast of North Korea, not far from the Soviet Union's easternmost seaport of Vladivostok.

Williams was preparing to fly a combat air patrol to cover the naval task force to which the carrier belonged. This mission turned out to be different than he expected, though. Instead of flying a routine patrol, Williams made history by tangling with seven Soviet Mikoyan-Gurevich MiG-15s and, according to his account, downing four of them. However, because of military secrecy and U.S. concerns over broadening the Korean conflict, the details of Williams' combat success remained secret for four decades and the veteran Navy pilot was not allowed to talk about what he had done. "When I finally told my wife, Camilla said, 'Oh, Royce!'" Williams, 97 and a veteran of three wars, recalled recently. "She was very surprised."



Jack Fellows' illustration, "One Down, Three to Go," depicts Lieutenant Royce Williams' encounter with Mikoyan-Gurevich MiG-15s on November 18, 1952, an action that stretched the limits of the Korean War. For years, the United States kept the encounter secret. The Soviet-flown MiGs lack national markings, reflecting what Williams stated in his after-action report. (Jack Williams)

Williams earned the Silver Star for his bravery that day, but some believe that wasn't enough. A bipartisan effort in Congress is now trying to upgrade the award to the Medal of Honor. "If I get a say in the matter, I would recommend an upgrade," said Samuel Cox, a retired admiral and current director of Naval History and Heritage Command for the Navy. "I'm convinced that his account is accurate. But that's the problem: it's his account and you can't be your own witness at an upgrade review."

Royce Williams' road to naval aviation started out rather inauspiciously. Born in South Dakota in 1925, he was a corporal in the Minnesota National Guard when Japan bombed Pearl Harbor in 1941. Hoping for a chance to become a combat pilot, Williams enlisted in the Navy. During the war he flew Grumman F6F Hellcats and Vought F4U Corsairs, primarily on

sub-hunting sorties, though he never saw combat. Williams was still in the Navy when the conflict in Korea broke out, and he received jet training and learned how to fly the F9F-5 Panther.

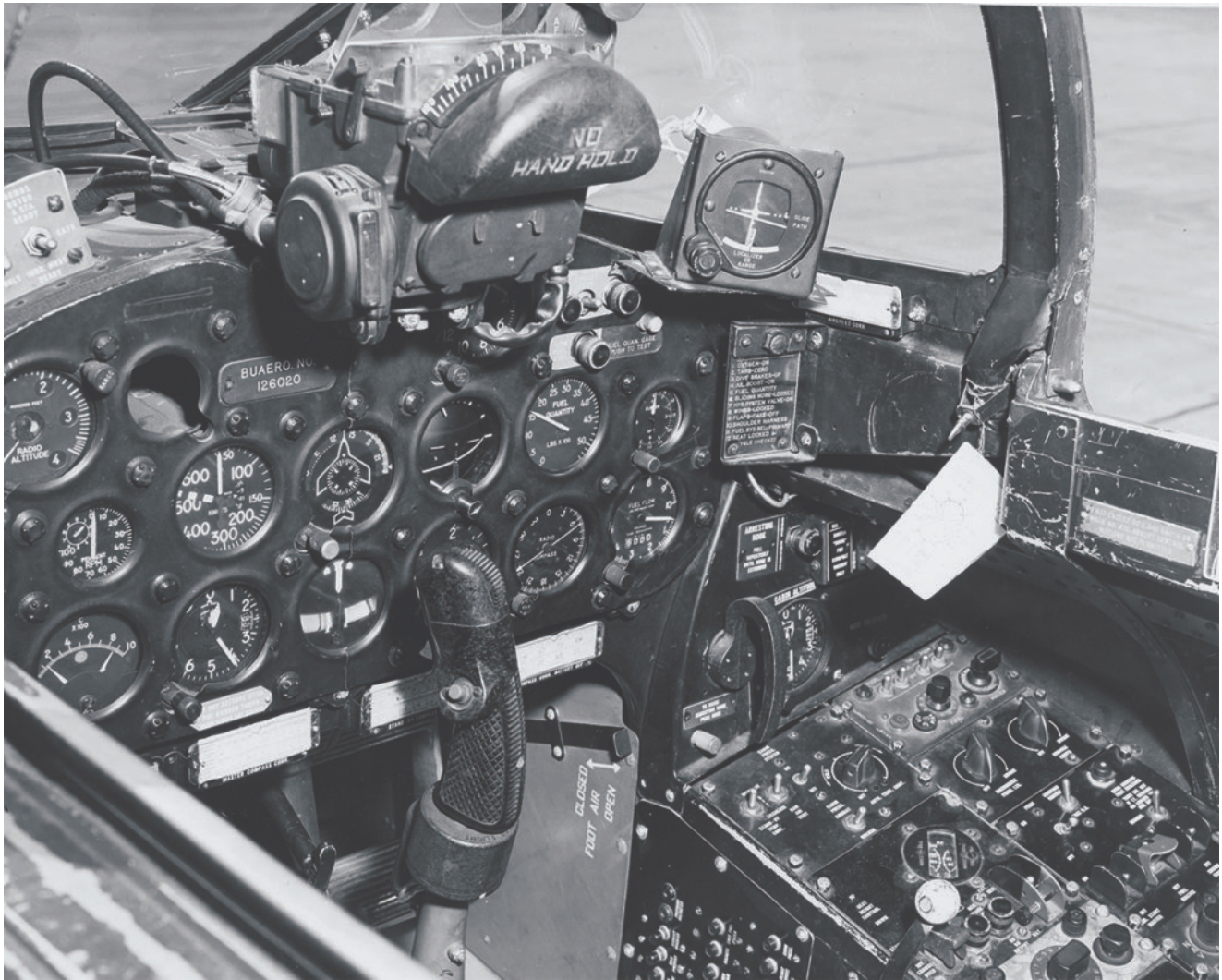
The Panther was the Navy's first successful carrier-based jet fighter. The prototype, powered by 5,700 pounds of thrust from a Rolls-Royce Nene engine (licensed in the United States as the Pratt & Whitney J42 P-8), first flew on November 24, 1947. The production version, the F9F-2, entered Navy service in 1949. Williams was flying the most-produced version of the Panther, the F9F-5. Powered by a more powerful water-injected Pratt & Whitney J48 (another Rolls Royce-derived engine) and armed with four 20mm cannons, it could also carry rockets and bombs for ground support and attacks on fortified positions. While the Panther's role in the Korean conflict has been overshadowed by the Air Force's North American F-86 Sabre, the single-engine, straight-winged aircraft performed admirably for the Navy in more than 78,000 combat missions over Korea.



A Grumman F9F-2 Panther of fighter squadron VF-112 lowers its folding wings in preparation for takeoff from the aircraft carrier USS *Philippine Sea*. (National Archives)

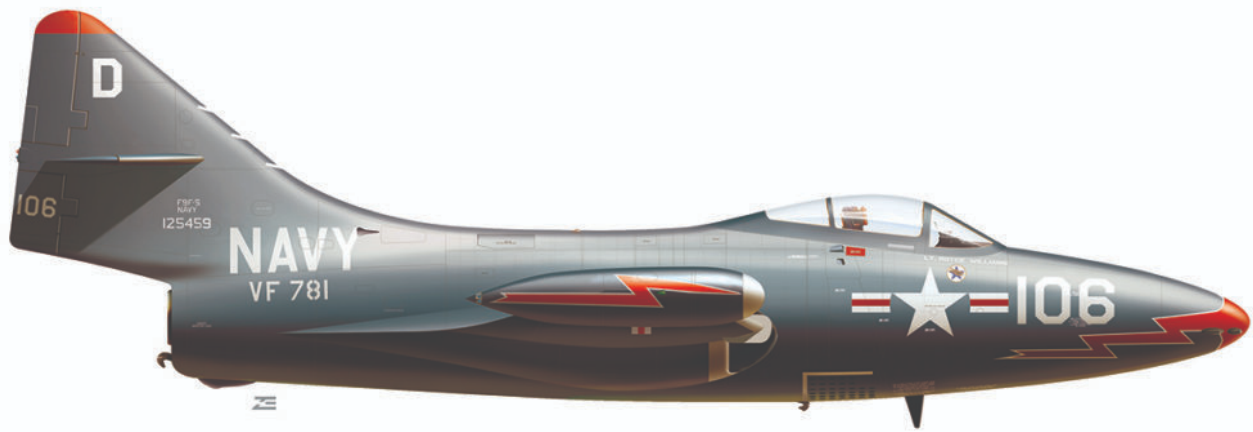
The Panther had one major drawback, however: its speed. Maxing out at around 600 miles per hour, the F9F-5 was noticeably slower than one of its main opponents, the MiG-15. The Soviet-made jet was about 100 miles per hour faster and could easily outclimb the Panther. The swept-wing Soviet aircraft also came armed with three cannons: two 23mm and a single 37mm. The North Korean air force was outfitted with thousands of MiG-15s for the war (and the aircraft reportedly remains in service there today as a trainer). North Korean pilots flew most of them, although a number of aviators were Chinese—and some were Soviets. “It was a completely unique event in the Cold War,” Cox said. “There was nothing else like it. During the Korean War, there were Russian pilots flying Russian aircraft with North Korean markings from bases in Chinese Manchuria. It was all a big secret, but everyone knew because the pilots would speak Russian.” The *Oriskany*’s presence close to Soviet territory meant that Soviet pilots in Soviet MiGs were also in the vicinity that day.

Snow was still blowing across the *Oriskany*’s deck when Williams launched with three other Navy pilots into the blizzard, with a ceiling of about 400 feet. Lt. Claire Elwood was division leader but he and his wingman, Lt. (jg) John Middleton, were forced to return to the carrier when Elwood’s jet developed a mechanical problem. That left Williams, the section leader, and his wingman, Lt. (jg) Dave Rowlands, alone to fly the patrol.



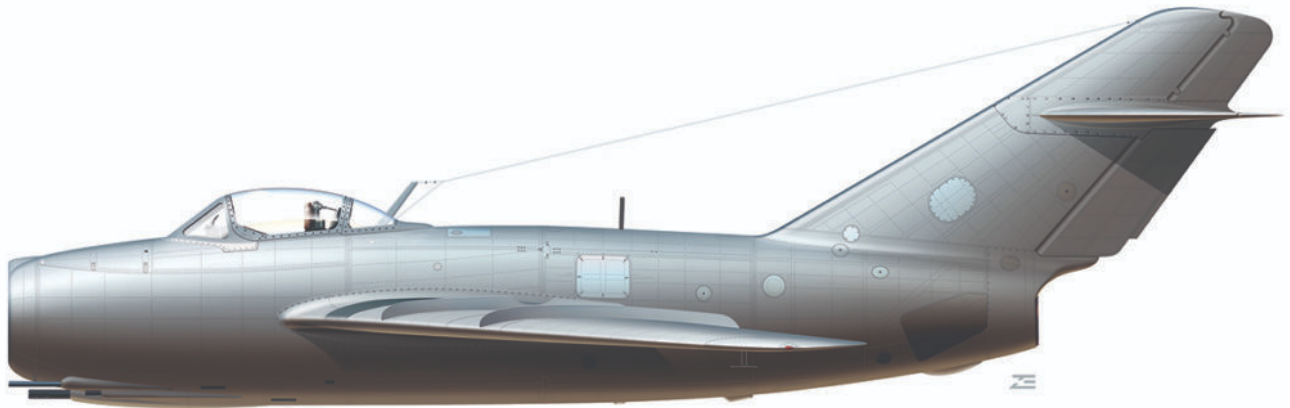
The cockpit of an F9F-5 reflects its World War II lineage, as did the airplane's straight wings. (National Archives)

They struggled through the scud to about 12,000 feet, then broke through into blue skies. The controllers on the carrier alerted them to “bogies” in the area and Williams noticed the contrails of seven aircraft at about 26,000 feet. The two pilots continued their ascent, and then they saw the suspect aircraft split into two groups and start a steep descent.



Williams flew a later model of the jet, the F9F-5. The Panther was the airplane the Navy used the most in the Korean War, and it was a Panther pilot who scored the Navy's first aerial victory in the conflict. (©Zaur Eylanbekov/FoxbatGraphics)

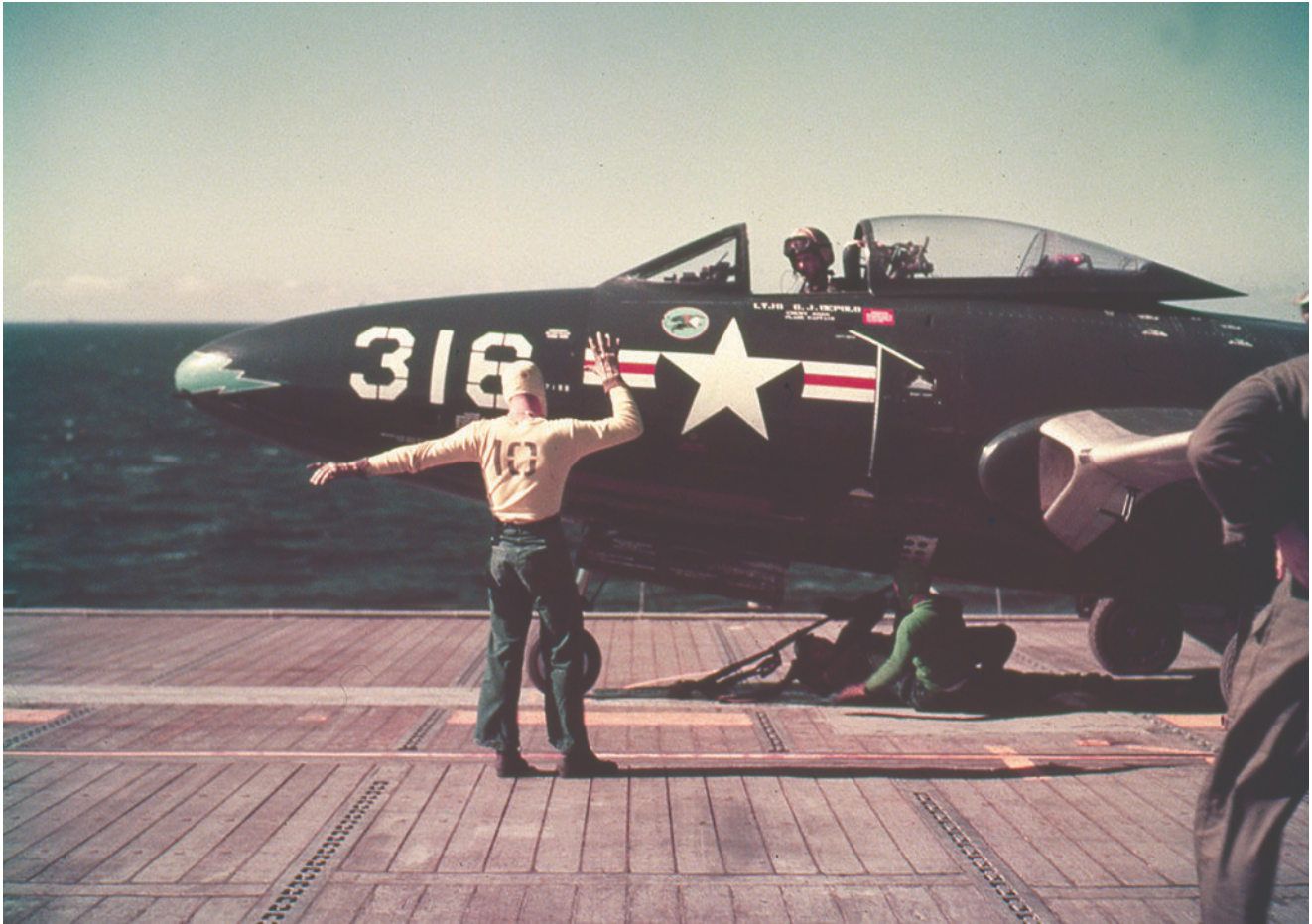
Williams was expecting trouble, but not from these airplanes. His patrol was providing cover for the task force, which was anticipating reprisals for an earlier attack by U.S. Navy aircraft in North Korea near the Soviet border. But these jets weren't North Korean—they belonged to the Soviet Union. After Russian radar had picked up the American Panthers, the MiG-15s had scrambled from their air base at Vladivostok. "They came diving at us and were coming in hot," Williams remembered recently. "They fired first, so we knew we were in a fight."



Williams' report that the MiGs he encountered were devoid of markings may have reflected the Soviet unwillingness to risk escalating the Korean War. (© Zaur Eylanbekov/FoxbatGraphics)

Williams flipped on his gunsight and fired a test burst; he was ready for combat. The next 35 minutes would find him twisting and turning in a deadly dance with the seven Soviet jets, using all his senses and experience to gain the upper hand on the enemy while trying to stay out of their gunsights.

The Navy pilot realized he was at a disadvantage. His Panther could easily fall prey to the swifter MiG-15s if he weren't careful. Williams would have to rely on his skills as a pilot and take advantage of any errors by his adversaries. "They made mistakes," he said, "and when they did, I capitalized on them."



An F9F-2 of VF-831 stands ready to launch from USS *Antietam* in November 1951. (National Archives)

He got his first chance at the start of the fray. Four of the MiGs zoomed at him, with one firing at but missing the Panther. Williams pulled into a hard climbing turn and came down behind the formation. "As they went on by, that put me in position to shoot at their number four guy," he recalled. "I was within range and tracking. I fired a short burst and he started smoking and going down."

Wingman Rowlands followed the damaged jet to the sea. That left Williams alone with the six remaining MiGs. He began making a series of high-G turns to avoid his pursuers and get behind one of them. The remaining jets quickly climbed to about 2,000 feet above the Panther, turned and dove for a head-on attack. Williams zeroed in on the lead plane and made his move. "I was able to adjust and track on him," he said. "He was firing on me. When he got in range, I had my gunsight aiming point on him and pulled the trigger with a short burst. He turned away. I think I hit him in the fuel tank. I learned he later crashed and died in the ocean, probably having run out of fuel."

At that moment, Williams didn't have the luxury of wondering what happened to that target. He now had to focus on the enemy's wingman, who was flying directly at him. The Navy pilot locked on and fired away. "He kept coming at me, but I'm pretty sure he was dead," Williams said. "He stopped firing and he didn't maneuver at all. His plane went right under mine and I'm certain that one went right in the water."



A Panther from VF-781 takes off from USS *Oriskany*—Williams' carrier—in July 1951. Panthers flew 78,000 combat missions for the Navy during the Korean conflict, mostly for ground attacks. (National Archives)

The perilous battle continued as the combatants soared and swerved above the clouds. The other three Soviet jets joined the fight and Williams had to stay sharp as they tried to knock him out of the air. "One of the jets made a run at me," he stated. "He didn't pull up while he was still behind me. He passed in front of me and that set me up for a close-in shot. I hit him good and pieces of his airplane came off. I had to maneuver to avoid hitting them."

By that point Rowlands had rejoined the fight, but he soon ran out of ammunition. Williams then fired a burst at another jet, which started smoking. But Williams had also exhausted his ammunition and couldn't finish off the MiG. In addition, he had another MiG on his tail. The

Soviet fighter fired and a single 37mm round struck the Panther's left wing and then passed into the engine area, where it exploded and knocked out the hydraulics. The Panther began shaking violently. Williams had lost control of his rudder and flaps and only had partial use of his ailerons, which he had to operate manually. With Rowlands following, Williams dived toward the clouds at 12,000 feet, porpoising all the way to avoid getting hit again by his pursuer.

"We lost sight of each other in the clouds," he said. Rowlands lost track of the other airplanes, too, and headed through the clouds back to the carrier. "Normally, I would have ejected but with the cold-water conditions I wouldn't have lasted long," said Williams. "It would have been sure death. So I stuck with it and headed back to the task force." Williams couldn't have known it at the time, but his encounter with the MiGs was the first and last time U.S. fighters and Russian jets from a base in the Soviet Union would engage in air-to-air combat.



Landing aboard a flattop in a jet like this Panther on its final approach to *Oriskany* was always a challenge; doing it in an airplane as badly shot up as Williams' made the task extra hair-raising. Williams had to rely on a little help from the carrier's captain to get lined up on his approach. (National Archives)

Flying at full throttle, Williams radioed in that his plane was severely damaged and he was trying to make it back to the carrier, which was now at general quarters. Unfortunately for him, the gun crews on an escorting destroyer did not receive word, and they opened up on the approaching aircraft until another Navy pilot reported that the incoming airplane was a friendly.

“I told the carrier I’m going to be landing at about 200 miles per hour, about 95 miles an hour faster than normal,” Williams said. “I’m also having control problems and can’t line up with the ship. I’m off by about 15 degrees. We also had heavy winds and a pitching deck. It was going to be interesting!”

The *Oriskany*’s captain, Courtney Shands, was aware of the situation and ordered the ship to alter its course to line up with William’s landing vector. The crippled craft caught the number-three wire on the landing deck and lurched to an abrupt stop.

After examining the damage to his Panther, Williams was surprised that he made it back at all. The flight crew counted 263 holes—most of them caused by shrapnel created when the 37mm round exploded in the accessory section of the engine compartment. It appeared that the airplane was a total loss. In fact, Williams heard the jet was going to be dumped into the sea because it was beyond repair. He believed that for decades until he learned that his old airplane had been fixed up and eventually saw service in Vietnam.



Happy to be in one piece aboard *Oriskany*, Williams points to 37mm shell damage in his Panther, one of 263 holes his crew counted in the airplane. With or without confirmation of his victories from November 18, 1952, Williams continued a successful Navy career, retiring as a captain in 1980. (Courtesy Royce Williams)

"I am the luckiest guy," Williams chuckled. "We always have raffles and I win about 50 percent of the time. One Christmas, I went to three different parties and won all of the door prizes. It's amazing!"

Despite Williams' combat success, Vice Admiral Robert P. Briscoe ordered him to keep silent about the air battle. Since the enemy jets were Soviet, there was concern that announcing the news might draw Russia into the war, in which the U.S. and United Nations forces were already battling those of North Korea and China. In addition, Briscoe told Williams that a National Security Agency intelligence team on one of the ships in the task force had been intercepting Soviet radio messages. If word got out, the Russians might start wondering if the task force had been eavesdropping, imperiling other projects. "I was instructed by Admiral Briscoe to never, ever talk about it," Williams recalled. "We had people who were tracking and listening to the Russians and we didn't want them to know we had this ability."

One person who did hear about Williams' encounter with Soviet MiGs was Dwight D. Eisenhower, the former Supreme Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force in Europe during World War II and now president-elect of the United States. During the 1952 campaign,

Eisenhower promised he would go to Korea if elected. He made good on that pledge on December 2, 1952, when he landed in Seoul. Williams and two other Navy pilots from that day—Middleton and Rowlands—received a summons for a high-level session with the president-elect. The three men had been told that Eisenhower wanted to learn more about the MiG-15 and how it stacked up against American aircraft, but Williams doubted that. “I think he just wanted to meet me,” he said. “That was just an excuse.”

Williams remembers being ushered into a room where he saw more admirals and five-star generals than he had ever seen in his life. In addition to Eisenhower, generals Omar Bradley and Mark Clark were in attendance. The president-elect’s son, Maj. John Eisenhower, served as bartender. After some initial discussion, Eisenhower asked Williams if he wanted a drink. “We have the world’s greatest scotch here,” the Navy pilot remembers the general saying. Williams said he preferred bourbon. Eisenhower wouldn’t take no for an answer and kept offering him scotch. “I didn’t want it,” Williams laughed. “That got the attention of the generals and admirals. They looked at me like, ‘What is this snot-nosed kid up to?’”

For his heroics that cold day in November, Williams received credit for one kill and one probable. Middleton, who had turned back to help Williams, was also recognized with a kill while Rowlands earned a probable. Some historians question those numbers and think a review is necessary. The secrecy of that mission and confusing after-battle reports likely led to a less-than-thorough examination of what happened that day.

From the beginning, Williams believed he got four kills, though he never talked about what happened or protested the Navy’s count. In fact, there was a great deal of uncertainty as to how many Soviet planes went down that day. It wasn’t until the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 that the truth came out. Secret files released by the Russians showed that four MiG-15s had been downed during the action. All four pilots were killed. The Navy never changed the record, though, despite growing evidence that it might be incorrect. With the Russian admission of four Soviet planes being shot down, Williams was finally free to talk about his role in the air battle that day.

One of those who believes the record should be updated is Cox, who has extensively studied the air battle. “As Director of Naval History, I look at everything I can find,” Admiral Cox said. “I would give him credit for four. I think Royce’s account is pretty doggone accurate. There are discrepancies between all of the reports, but I’m confident that what he said is what happened.”



On the deck of the USS *Midway*, now a museum in San Diego, California, Williams visits a Panther painted in the markings his own airplane wore in November 1952. The addition of four “kill marks” belatedly acknowledges his four MiG victories. (CJ Machado)

Not only should the record be changed, but some believe Williams’ Silver Star should be upgraded to the Medal of Honor. U.S. Representative Darrell Issa has sponsored a bill authorizing the president to bestow the nation’s highest military award to Williams, who lives in the same congressional district in Southern California as the congressman. Issa wants to see the medal presented to Williams as soon as possible. Though still tough and sharp as ever, the former flyer is 97 years old, making time an issue. The House passed the measure in July 2022 and it advanced to the Senate.

“I’m flabbergasted,” Williams said about the effort to upgrade his Silver Star. “They’re comparing what I did to Maj. George Davis of the U.S. Air Force, who was credited with shooting down two MiGs on his final flight when he got shot down and killed in Korea in 1952. In short order, they had the Medal of Honor for him.”

One person who will be particularly pleased if the medal is upgraded is CJ Machado, a filmmaker who chronicled Williams’ story in the 2017 short film *Forgotten Hero*. Machado believes the secrecy about what happened that day over the Sea of Japan has prevented Williams from getting the credit he deserves. For Machado, the effort to get him the Medal of Honor is deeply personal. Over the years, she has become close to the retired Navy officer

and looks upon him as a father figure. “Captain Royce Williams is a wonderful and dear soul,” she said. “I’m biased because I know him so well, but I believe Royce deserves to be acknowledged for that amazing feat.”

Williams ended up flying 70 combat missions in Korea. In Vietnam, he flew 110 missions in the Vought F-8E Crusader and McDonnell Douglas F-4B Phantom II. By the time he retired in 1980 as a captain and flag officer he had spent 37 years in the Navy. In all that time he had no mission more remarkable than the one he flew on November 18, 1952.

Massachusetts-based author Dave Kindy is a frequent contributor to Aviation History and other HistoryNet publications, as well as Air & Space Quarterly, the Washington Post and Smithsonian. For further reading, he recommends Holding the Line: The Naval Air Campaign in Korea by Thomas McKelvey Cleaver, Korean Air War: Sabres, MiGs and Meteors, 1950-1953 by Michael Napier and “The story of the Top-Secret Dogfight where legendary US Korean War F9F Naval Aviator E. Royce Williams, Jr., shot down 4 Soviet MiG-15s,” an article written by Dario Leone for theaviationgeekclub.com.

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