



FOUR DOWN!

The Korean Combat
the U.S. Tried to Forget

BY THOMAS MCKELVEY CLEAVER

The Panther should have not been a match for the much faster, more maneuverable MIGs, but Lt. Royce Williams didn't get that memo. (Illustration by Stan Stokes via Royce Williams)

November 18, 1952: The cloud cover was 500 feet

above the freezing Sea of Japan; visibility estimated at two miles in blowing snow as the Siberian blizzard howled over the pitching, rolling shapes of the ships forming Task Force 77. On the flight deck of the USS *Oriskany* (CVA-34), the deck crews maneuvered two Grumman F9F-5 Panthers of VF-781 onto the catapults. Division leader Lieutenant Claire Elwood and wingman Lt.(jg) John Middleton advanced their throttles and held the planes in position by standing on the brakes. They were then shot off the bow in quick succession, dipping low over the gray seas as they tucked their gear. Section leader Lieutenant Royce Williams and wingman Lt.(jg) David Rowlands moved into position and soon followed Elwood and Middleton as spray flew over the rising bow. In the blizzard snow, the four dark blue jets were soon swallowed in the blinding white flurries within the clouds, their noses high, climbing under full power at 5,000 feet per minute.



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As each pilot strained to maintain visual reference of each other, the radio came alive with the information that bogies were 83 miles north, directly inbound toward the task force. The order was simple: intercept. After two minutes in the clouds, it began to get brighter and suddenly they were in clear skies at 12,000 feet. "None of us had ever flown together before," Royce Williams recalled. "When the carrier decided to launch an extra CAP, the squadron gave it to the four of us because for various reasons, we hadn't been able to fly a lot recently. My first mission in 10 days after catching a cold had been the strikes against Hoeryong that morning."

The four Panthers continued straining upward. As they passed through 16,000 feet, Section leader Williams spotted seven contrails far above, at 40,000 feet or more. A moment later, his sharp eyes caught the sun flashing on the shiny swept-wing MiG-15s flying abreast each other, carrying the red star of the Soviet Union on their flanks. "I flipped on my gunsight and fired a burst to test my guns. At that moment, Lieutenant Elwood, the flight leader, reported his fuel pump warning light had come on. The CIC directed him to report overhead the *Oriskany*. He passed the lead

to me and turned back to the task force with his wingman flying as his safety escort." The odds had just gone from four against seven to two against seven as the MiGs continued inbound. Williams maintained his climb.

The odds are not good

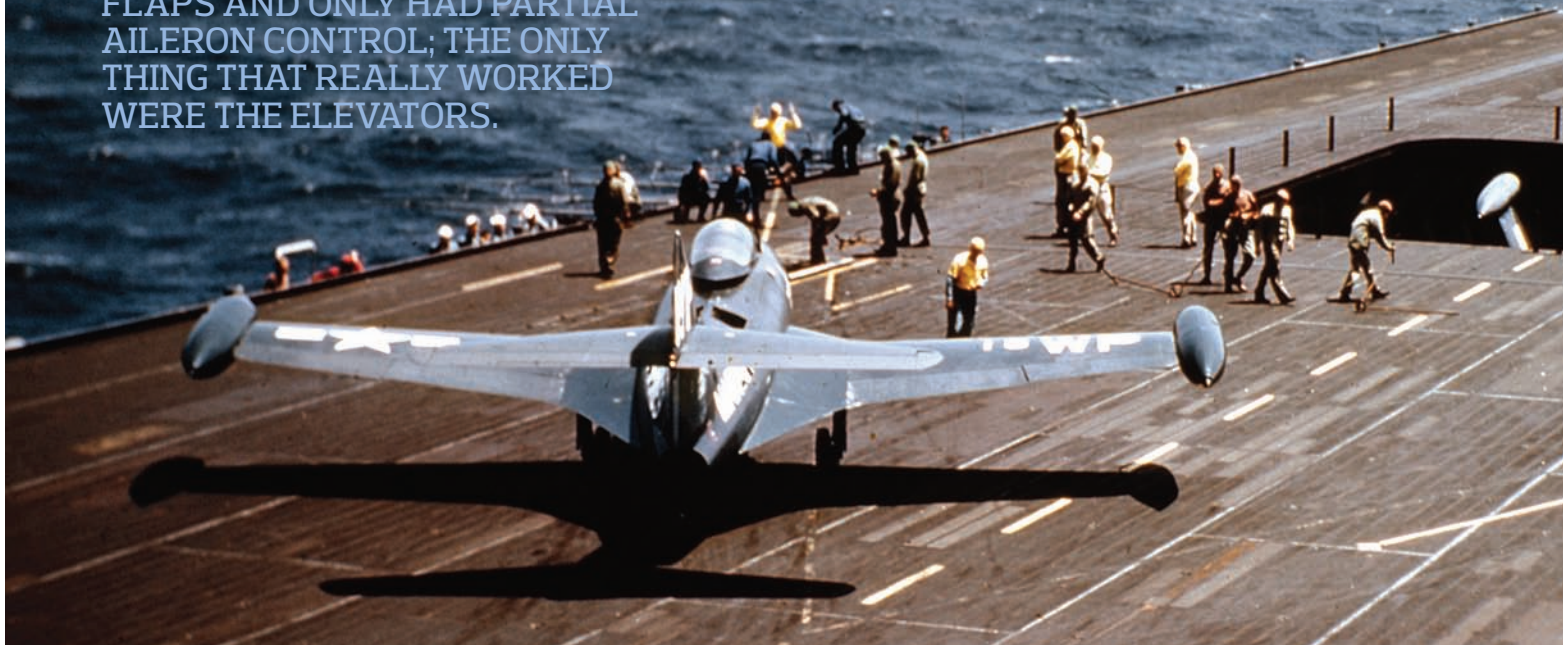
"We were just going through 26,000 feet when the Russians split up and dove out of the contrail layer; the first ones came at us from the side in a four-plane formation, shooting. I pulled into a hard climbing left turn and came around on the number four MiG. I fired a burst and he went down smoking. My wingman then followed him down, leaving me alone."

The odds were now one against six. The three remaining MiGs of that group climbed and positioned themselves for another firing run. They reversed course and Williams turned into them again and again, firing as they flashed by at a very high closure rate. "They had me cold on maneuverability and acceleration—the MiG was vastly superior on those counts to the F9F." The other three MiGs joined in, with Williams now dog-fighting five MiGs in an airplane that shouldn't have been able to compete. While he reversed, jinked, and rolled against the gaggle, he saw an MiG locked on his six o'clock position but executed a very hard turn and escaped. Several times he tracked an individual MiG and fired rounds that appeared to hit, but he could not follow up, instead trying to keep his six o'clock clear. "I was firing at every MiG that passed within gun range

Bottom: An F9F-2B Panther moves to the forward parking area on the USS *Valley Forge* after flying a mission over North Korea. It was assigned to VF-111. (Photo by Robert Balsler via Warren Thompson)
Inset: Lt. Williams boards an F9F-5 Panther in 1952. Note the immersion suit (named the "poopy suit") for survival in the freezing Sea of Japan. (Photo courtesy of Royce Williams)



I SUDDENLY LOST RUDDER AND FLAPS AND ONLY HAD PARTIAL AILERON CONTROL; THE ONLY THING THAT REALLY WORKED WERE THE ELEVATORS.



as they came by." Williams kept the Panther at full throttle, turning into the enemy fighters each time they commenced a firing pass.

"Finally, the leader and his wingman went off to the right while I went after the section leader of the plane I'd shot down. He went into the sun and I lost him, then I saw the leader and wingman come around for a diving attack on me. I turned into them and fired at the leader. He turned away and the wingman rolled down on me and we went past belly-to-belly as I raked him with a long burst. He went down on fire." Williams pulled up and away from the burning enemy fighter. "The section leader then came around and I turned into him, fired at him, and he went down. The leader then came around again, I fired, and parts came off him as he dove away." In the fight of his life, Royce Williams did what no other American pilot had accomplished in this war: shot down four MiG-15s in one mission.

I'm hit!

"As I maneuvered to avoid the wreckage, I was porpoising to try and clear my tail. I was tracking another wounded MiG when I suddenly spotted one of the others as he slid in on my six. He fired a burst with his 37mm cannon and hit me in the wing. The shell went into the engine and messed up the hydraulic unit in the accessory section, and I suddenly lost rudder and flaps and only had partial aileron control; the only thing that really worked were the elevators. I dove toward the cloud deck below at 13,000 feet, and he was 500 feet behind me and still shooting. My wingman finally got back in the fight and came in on him, and he pulled away as I went into the clouds." Williams was in serious trouble as he fought for

control of the Panther, hoping he could pull out of his dive. "I came out of the clouds at around 400 feet. I was too low to eject; you had to be above 1,200 feet and climbing to successfully eject from a Panther, so I was stuck with staying in the airplane, like it or not. I soon discovered it was uncontrollable below 170 knots, so I had to maintain high speed regardless." It also didn't help that several of the destroyers escorting the task force opened fire on Williams as he passed a few hundred feet overhead. "Fortunately, I was low enough that they didn't have a chance to really aim, so nobody hit me."

This should have been ugly

Aboard the *Oriskany*, they cleared the deck for what was obviously going to be a crash landing.

A Marine-operated Panther approaches the *F.D.R.* (CV-42) during a Sixth Fleet cruise in 1952. Soon after, she reported to Puget Sound for her SCB-110 series up-fitting and overhaul to an angled-deck *Midway*-class CVA with steam catapults and a hurricane bow. (Photo by Stan Piet)



One of VF-51's Panthers, loaded with four 250-pound frag bombs, heads for enemy territory on a close air support mission. The squadron was assigned to the USS *Valley Forge* in 1952. (Photo by Hal Schwan via Warren Thompson)



Above: Lt. Williams looks at the damage his F9F-5 Panther absorbed in the engagement with seven Soviet-flown MiG-15s. (Photo courtesy of Royce Williams)

Right: This close-up view of Lt. Williams' Panther shows the gaping hole made by a 37mm cannon round from a MiG-15. (Photo by Burdette Ives via Warren Thompson)

"I didn't want to ditch, because I wasn't sure I could make a successful ditching, and that water was cold enough I knew I wouldn't last 10 minutes even in my poopy suit."

The Panther's normal landing speed was 105 knots. Williams kept the bucking airplane under control as he made a straight-in approach, maintaining 170 knots. "The *Oriskany's* captain headed the ship just away from the wind, which gave me the opportunity to come aboard, and I caught the three wire and shut her down."

Williams climbed out of the riddled jet and stared at the damage, surprised he had made it back. "They counted 263 holes in the airplane, mostly from 23mm hits and some 37mm hits, including the one in the wing that went into the engine. I had fired off all 760 rounds of 20mm I had aboard. I wouldn't have had a chance if I hadn't been armed with those 20mm cannons." After removing everything of value from BuNo 125459, the deck crew heaved the broken carcass overboard and it disappeared into the dark sea.

And then the fiction begins: shooting Russians wasn't good

Lieutenant Royce Williams had just become the victor over four enemy jets. It was an unheard-of performance, one no other Naval Aviator would equal in all the years since; given that the F9F-5 Panther was outperformed on nearly all points—speed, altitude, maneuverability, and firepower—by the MiG-15, which was nearly 70mph faster and had a superior thrust-to-weight ratio. It was truly a performance for the record books. But so far as the Navy was concerned, Williams' incredible fight opened the proverbial "can of worms" and would be unheard of for 50 years. In the meantime, a preliminary version of the mission was compiled and became official, though it had little connection with the facts. Williams was credited with a kill and a probable-damaged. Lt.(jg) John Middleton had been wingman to division leader Elwood and at the end of the 35-minute fight, was vectored toward a descending MiG. As he approached it, he fired a burst out of range and the pilot ejected; Middleton was credited with a single kill. Williams' wingman, Dave Rowlands, who never fired a shot in the entire combat, was awarded a probable. It would be 50 years until the story was straightened out, and this account in *Flight Journal* is the first detailed description of the event.



The truth told here for the first time

The problem was that after two years spent attacking enemy lines of supply in North Korea, the Navy had finally gotten approval to hit the supply lines at their source and sent all four carriers of Task Force 77 to do the job. Hoeryong was the main entry point into North Korea for supplies coming from the Soviet Union and China through Manchuria. It was right at the mouth of the Yalu River on the Sea of Japan; directly across the river, not five miles away, was Vladivostok, the major Soviet base in the Pacific. Hitting Hoeryong carried a lot of potential for trouble. As

A Soviet-flown MiG-15 catches fire as captured by Williams' gun camera during the engagement. (Photo courtesy of Royce Williams)

THIS WAS A FIGHT THAT HAD DIRECTLY PITTED THE TWO GREAT COLD WAR ADVERSARIES AGAINST EACH OTHER NOSE-TO-NOSE.

Williams recalled, "We were given specific routes to follow going into and egressing the target, to be certain we didn't get anywhere near the Soviet border. We were told the Russians were very worried about the fact we were there." With the driving Siberian winter snowstorm making everything worse, the Hoeryong strikes were a very chancy event closely watched by all concerned.

Once the *Oriskany* had returned to Yokosuka the following week, the young Lieutenant was ordered to report to Vice Admiral Robert P. Briscoe, Commander Naval Forces Far East. Admiral Briscoe informed Williams that the new National Security Agency had a team aboard the cruiser USS *Helena*, which recorded all the Russian radio traffic leading up to and during the fight; they had been the unit that warned the fleet when the Russians decided to send aircraft into the combat area. There was no way that the fight could be publicized, since there was too much of a chance that the Russians would learn how they had been spotted. At the highest levels of U.S. and U.N. command, there was real fear that such an "incident" between U.S. and Soviet forces could change the "police action" of Korea into World War III. Never mind that Air Force pilots were fighting hundreds of Russian "volunteers" flying MiG-15s with North Korean markings in "MiG Alley," this was a fight that had directly pitted the two great Cold War adversaries against each other nose-to-nose. After cautioning Williams to tell no one about the fight, the admiral revealed to him that the NSA team had proof he had gotten at least three of the MiGs, and that the fourth had crash landed. Unfortunately, his

gun camera footage had been "edited" by a sailor aboard the *Oriskany* and only showed portions of the encounter, with two MiGs being hit solidly.

The Russkies confirm

Williams would remain quiet about the event for 50 years while he flew with Air Force Korean War aces at the Fighter Weapons School at Nellis, and commanded Navy fighter squadrons through the Cold War and Vietnam. Following the end of the Cold War in 1992, the Russians revealed that Williams had indeed gotten four: Captain Belyakov, Captain Vandalov, Lieutenant Pakhomkin, and Lieutenant Tarshinov of the VVS-PVO, the Air Defense Forces of the Red

This F9F-2 from VF-831, a reserve squadron from Floyd Bennett Field was rear-ended by another Panther while landing aboard CV-36 in during its nine-month Korean War deployment (1951/1952). (Photo courtesy of Stan Plet)



Air Force. Vandalov, Pakhomkin, and Tarshinov had all been directly shot down in the fight. Belyakov, the flight leader, had been badly shot up by Williams and crash landed as soon as he was over Soviet territory, and killed in the crash. Royce Williams was the top-scoring carrier-based Naval Aviator of the “forgotten war” and the top-scoring Naval Aviator in a Navy jet (Guy Bordelon scored five in an F4U-5N Corsair and Marine Major John Bolt scored six flying an F-86 with the Air Force). His score of four in one fight is a performance unequaled since.

Williams’ success that day was all the more

IT WAS CLEAR TO ALL CONCERNED IN THOSE INCIDENTS THAT THE PANTHER WAS THOROUGHLY OUT-PERFORMED BY THE SOVIET FIGHTER, AND THAT ONLY SUPERIOR PILOT SKILL HAD GIVEN THE NAVY THOSE VICTORIES.

incredible given that Naval Aviators weren’t much involved in aerial combat at that point in the war. The Panther had been victorious the first time it came up against the MiG-15 on November 9, 1950, when LCDR William “Bill” Amen of VF-111 “Sundowners” flying an F9F-2B, shot down a MiG-15. Two more had been downed on November 18, 1950, two years to the day prior to Williams’ fight. It was clear to all concerned in those incidents that the Panther was thoroughly out-performed by the Soviet fighter, and that only superior pilot skill had given the Navy those victories. The F9F-5 had more power than the F9F-2, but was heavier, cancelling out any performance gain in maneuverability. As a result, the Navy had stayed well away from “MiG Alley” during operations in the succeeding two years; the strikes against Hoeryong were the first time the Navy had ventured within range of the MiGs. As Williams recalled, “We did little in the way of tactics and not much aerial gunnery.”

A born shooter

Williams himself was an excellent shot, growing up in western Minnesota and shooting small game from a young age. He was 16 when the Second World War broke out. Eighteen in 1944, he was able to join the Navy through the V-5 program, and graduated with his Wings of Gold from Pensacola just at the end of the war. His gunnery scores in training drew comment, and he was sent on to fighter training at Opa Locka. Following completion of his training, 20-year-old Ensign Williams then joined VBF-81, flying F6F-5 Hellcats from the newly commissioned USS *Princeton*

(CV-37). With a short side trip to VBF-98 at NAS Los Alamitos flying F4Us, Williams was aboard “Sweet P” on a tour to Saipan and on to China in 1947, after VBF-81 became VF-121 with transition to the F8F-1 Bearcat. Those were the lean years for Naval Aviation, and the youngster logged only 33 traps in a six-month cruise while the air group logged many hours in touch football and ready-room movies.

In 1949, the Navy decided Lt.(jg) Williams was career material, and he was sent to the University of Minnesota, where he completed his undergraduate degree in five semesters. During this time, he met and impressed Lt. Cdr. Stan Holme, executive officer of the naval training detachment at UM. “I expected to go to the fleet straight off after I graduated since the war had broken

Cougar: The Swept-Wing Panther

When you talk U.S. Navy jets, you have to talk F9Fs. Grumman’s original fleet-model F9F-2 Panther remained the standard configuration through the “dash five,” which served beyond the end of the Korean War in 1953. But jet fighter development accelerated during the decade, as the U.S. Air Force and foreign nations—notably Soviet Russia—already had fielded swept-wing types in combat.

Naval aviation faced a crisis: continue operating straight-wing jets like the F9F-2 to 5 and McDonnell’s F2H Banshee, or take the leap into the swept-wing era. The latter was necessary to remain competitive but it also posed major risks. In the days before angled deck carriers, higher landing speeds for swept-wing aircraft inevitably meant more losses. A survivor of the era, astronaut Wally Schirra, said, “You either had an arrested landing or a major accident.”

But the Navy already had made its decision. In 1951, Grumman signed a contract for the swept-wing F9F-6, and test pilot Fred Rowley flew it six months later. The Cougar proved a long-lived cat.

Rated at 560 knots, the first Cougars arrived in VF-32 in late 1952,



(Photo courtesy of Google Images)

affording tailhookers a 60-kt edge over dash two Panthers. Additionally, F9F-8Bs with a strike capability were flown by some attack squadrons. Meanwhile, the Blue Angels adopted the Cougar in 1953.

The last fleet Cougars were F9F-8P photo birds, retired in 1960.

Two-seat trainer variants appeared in 1956 and, redesignated TF-9Js, they became Marine FACs in South Vietnam. Cougars departed Training Command in 1974, ending 22 years of service. — Barrett Tillman



out, but they gave me orders to the Post Graduate School in Monterey." Completing that assignment in December 1951, Williams was assigned to NAS Miramar to fly F4U Corsairs in VF-784, commanded by Lt. Cdr. Martin D. "Red" Carmody, with whom he had flown previously on the *Princeton* and who would be captain of USS *Kitty Hawk* during Williams' first CAG tour in Vietnam. "I saw these Panthers over on the other side of the field, they were with VF-781, and I discovered that Stan Holme was their new C.O." Williams managed to convince Holme that he was jet pilot material, and Holme arranged his transfer to VF-781 a few months before the squadron deployed to Korea aboard the *Oriskany* that summer.

Keeping the secret wasn't easy

A month after the incident over the Sea of Japan, Lieutenant Williams was in Seoul to brief President-elect Eisenhower, Generals Omar Bradley and Mark Clark, and Admiral Arthur Radford about the air war, stopping along the way to brief Admiral J.J. "Jocko" Clark, CTF-77 aboard



his flagship USS *Missouri*. Having been told of the MiG encounter, Ike had specifically asked to talk to Williams as someone who could speak knowledgeably about "our planes versus theirs." As Williams recalled, the incoming commander-in-chief spent some time trying to convince him that scotch was superior to the competition, with a notable lack of success.

"I kept quiet all those years, but then when I learned the Russians had provided the names of the pilots who had been killed in the fight. A good friend of mine pointed out that I wouldn't be violating security to tell the story now." Williams has made presentations at the National Museum of Naval Aviation in Pensacola over the years since, but the history books have yet to be changed. Today, he and his grade-school sweetheart

Camilla, to whom he has been married since 1947, live in their Japanese-style home in Escondido, California, where he maintains a Japanese garden that is acclaimed by those locals in the know. But when he catches sight of a jet flying out of Miramar, it's clear that "once a tailhooker, always a tailhooker." †

Above: Royce, wife Cam Williams, and fellow VF-781 squadron mate Ed Bethel, view Panther painted as 106-D aboard USS *Midway* Museum, San Diego in 2011. (Photo courtesy of Royce Williams)
Left: Royce Williams, as with most fighter pilots, has never lost his fascination with USN aircraft. (Photo courtesy of Royce Williams)