

American Icons at War, Korea 1953



By Jeff Erickson

F9F-5 Panthers of VMF-311 Over Korea, 1953. (Illustration by Jeff Erickson)

The war of aggression waged by North Korea and its communist allies (1950-1953) severely tested the resolve of the free world and the viability of the United Nations as an enforcer of international law. Fought in the aftermath of the most destructive war in human history and under the shadow of nuclear weapons, the Korean War evolved into a lengthy and indecisive war of attrition that would ultimately end in stalemate. Weary of war and complacent in victory over the Axis Powers, the United States and its allies were ill prepared to confront the massive onslaught from North Korea. Consequently, much of the combat burden fell to WWII veterans and reservists with key skills and experience that were in short supply. Abruptly extracted from civilian careers or peacetime assignments, these “retreads” were thrown into the breach, often equipped with weapons that were obsolete or inadequate. America’s air power in the Far East played a pivotal role in reversing the fortunes of war in Korea and U.S. Marine aviators were in the thick of it, providing air cover and close air support for their brethren on the ground.

Although they had already done their part as Naval Aviators in WWII, two of the most iconic figures of America’s “Greatest Generation” were among those who answered the call. Through an improbable twist of fate and/or bureaucratic coincidence, the destinies of Ted Williams, the perennial All Star of Major League Baseball and John Glenn, the future astronaut and first American to orbit the Earth would come together in a most unlikely venue. They literally fought side by side in the hostile and unforgiving skies over the Korean Peninsula, putting their lives on the line in a life and death struggle to hold the line against communist aggression.

Ted Williams is best known for his legendary exploits with the Boston Red Sox. He is widely acknowledged as one of the greatest baseball players of all time. During his long and storied career with the Red Sox, he had an exemplary record as a power hitter. His remarkable accomplishments in baseball would have undoubtedly been even greater, but for the fact that his career was twice interrupted by wartime military service. During WWII, Ted Williams took a time-out from *The National Pastime* to serve his country as a naval aviator. In May 1942, the American League Triple Crown left fielder enlisted in the U.S. Navy and began training as an aviation cadet. During flight training, he proved to be an exceptionally gifted aviator, quickly mastering key skills and qualifying as a fighter pilot.¹ In May 1944, he was commissioned as a 2nd Lieutenant in the U.S. Marine Corps and served as a flight instructor in the F4U Corsair at NAS Pensacola, Florida. He was then deployed to



Glenn and Williams as Marine Aviators in Korea, 1953. (Glenn - The Ohio Channel, OSU Photo Archives; Williams – Associated Press photo)

the Pacific, but the war ended before his unit saw action in combat. Williams was released from active duty in January 1946 but remained in the Marine Corps Reserve where he attained the rank of Captain.²

In May 1952, Williams was recalled to active duty with the Marines for service in the Korean War. He trained in the Grumman F9F Panther, a first-generation naval jet fighter, and was assigned to Marine Fighter Squadron VMF-311, known as the *Tomcats*.² Based at the

Pohang (K-3) Airbase, South Korea, the squadron flew frequent interdiction, close air support and reconnaissance missions in support of U.N. ground forces.³ Beginning in February 1953, Capt. Williams regularly flew combat missions with VMF-311. Close air support in Korea usually required pilots to press the attack at very low altitudes, exposing them to intense anti-aircraft and small arms fire. Missions were often flown in marginal weather conditions and in close proximity to terrain. On at least two occasions, Ted Williams' Panther was badly damaged by ground fire and/or debris from secondary explosions. On about half of his missions with VMF-311, Ted flew as wingman with another notable Marine aviator and future household name, Maj. John Glenn.

John Glenn was also a WWII veteran, receiving his commission as a Naval Aviator in March 1943. He later accepted a transfer to the Marine Corps and served in the Pacific with Marine Observation Squadron VMO-155 (later VMF-155). His unit also flew the F4U Corsair, completing 57 combat missions in the Marshall Islands during the last half of 1944. Glenn served with distinction in the Pacific, earning two Distinguished



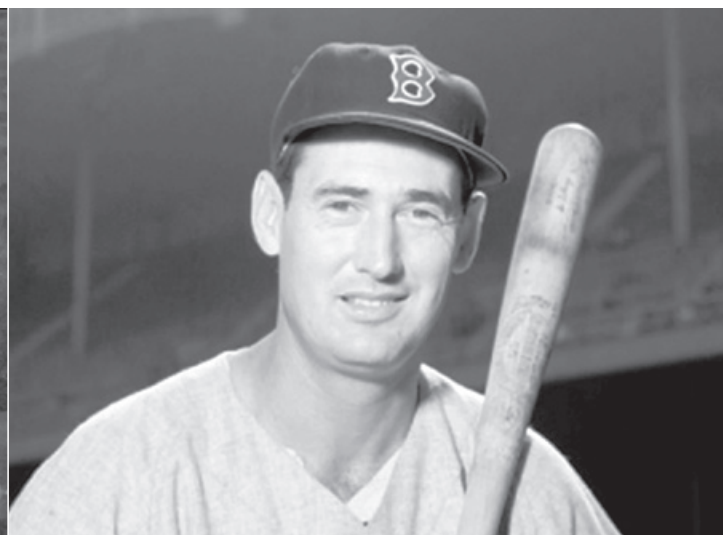
Glenn and Williams Discuss Tactics at K-3 Airbase, South Korea, 1953. (Bill Nowlin, Reference 5)

Flying Crosses and ten Air Medals for his WWII service. He continued to serve as a fighter pilot after the war, achieving the rank of major and transitioning to the F9F Panther jet fighter. In February 1953, he joined VMF-311 in Korea and was assigned as the Squadron's Operations Officer.⁴ Major Glenn gained a reputation as an aggressive combat pilot while flying with the *Tomcats*, earning the nickname "Magnet Ass" because of his ability to

attract enemy flak. Glenn sustained battle damage to his aircraft no less than 12 times during his 63 combat missions.⁵ On one occasion, he returned from a mission with more than 250 bullet holes in his aircraft!⁴

In his memoirs, John Glenn described an incident that illustrates the nature of the hazards faced by VMF-311 pilots attacking ground targets. During a mission over the Haeju Peninsula, John Glenn made an attack on a suspected ammunition storage facility, scoring a hit followed almost immediately by secondary explosions. Trailing closely behind his element leader, Ted Williams reported being hit over the radio as he pulled out of his bomb run. As they flew to their post-strike rendezvous, Glenn flew around his wingman's aircraft to look for damage. He noted a good size hole in the underside of Ted's right wingtip fuel tank. Upon returning to K-3, the ground crew removed the tank and discovered a rock inside, evidently a projectile from a secondary explosion.

On February 16, 1953, pilots from VMF-311 participated in a ground attack mission as part of a large-scale air strike against a concentration of troops and supplies at Kyomipo,



Glenn and Williams in their Celebrated Roles as American Cultural Icons. (Glenn – NASA Photo, Williams – Boston Red Sox photo)

near Pyongyang North Korea. After delivering a pair of 250 lb. bombs at very low altitude, Captain William's Panther was struck repeatedly by small arms fire. As he departed the target area, Ted's flight controls began to vibrate violently as he lost hydraulic pressure. His landing gear came down, most of his instruments were inoperative and his radio failed. He was able to retract the landing gear, but his aircraft caught fire as he struggled to gain altitude. Guided by another VMF-311 aircraft, Williams headed for the nearest airfield, K-13 at Suwon. As he approached the field, he was unable to lower his landing gear or flaps. Capt. Williams executed a belly landing at nearly twice the normal landing speed. As his crippled Panther skidded to the right side of the runway, Ted managed to blow the canopy and escape off the leading edge of the wing just before the aircraft was consumed in flames.^{5,6} When questioned about why he had not bailed out of the stricken aircraft, Williams confided his fear that with his 6ft. 4in. frame, he would almost certainly have suffered a serious leg injury if he attempted to eject from the Panther.⁵

Ted was back in the air the next day and continued to fly ground attack sorties with the *Tomcats* for another three months. He completed a total of 39 combat missions in Korea and was awarded the Air Medal three times while serving with VMF-311. Captain Williams' flight status was terminated in June 1953 due to a persistent medical condition and he was sent to Hawaii for treatment.

That same month, Major Glenn took advantage of a pilot exchange program with the U.S. Air Force, transferring to the 25th Fighter-Interceptor Squadron to fly the F-86F Sabre in an air-to-air combat role. He flew an additional 27 combat missions in the Sabre. Although opportunities to engage North Korean fighters were infrequent at this point in the war, Glenn managed to score three aerial victories over MiG-15s in nine days.^{3,7} Major Glenn was awarded two more Distinguished Flying Crosses and eight additional Air Medals for his service in Korea.

After the Korean War, both men went on to attain national recognition and unparalleled records of achievement in their respective fields of endeavor. Ted Williams recovered from his ailments and resumed his career with the Red Sox in August 1953. He played his entire 19-year career with Boston, retiring in 1960. During his illustrious major league career, he was a 19-time All Star, 2-time American League MVP and 6-time American League Batting Champion, with a lifetime .344 batting average and 521 homeruns. He was selected as a member of Major League Baseball's All-Century and All-Time Teams. Ted Williams was inducted into the Major League Baseball Hall of Fame in July 1966 on the first ballot.

John Glenn went on to serve with the Marine Corps as a test pilot, setting a trans-continental speed record in July 1957 and earning a fifth Distinguished Flying Cross.⁴ In April 1959, he was selected by NASA as one of the original seven astronauts for



The Presidential Medal of Freedom.
(Photo from Wikimedia Commons)

the Project Mercury manned spaceflight program and became the first American to orbit the Earth in February 1962. Glenn later became a central figure in national politics, serving as U.S. Senator from Ohio from 1974 through 1998. During his final year in the Senate, he returned to space as a Mission Specialist aboard the Space Shuttle Discovery on the STS-95 mission.

As Marine aviators, Glenn and Williams held each other in high regard and they remained in contact after the war. As the years passed, their friendship became closer and Glenn made regular visits to Williams' home in Florida. When John Glenn made his encore venture into

space as a payload specialist aboard the Space Shuttle Discovery, Ted Williams (then 80 years old and in failing health) insisted on attending the launch at Cape Canaveral.⁵

In recognition of their lifetime achievements, both men were ultimately recognized with the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's most prestigious award for accomplishment as a civilian. President George H.W. Bush presented the award to Ted Williams in November 1991, and John Glenn was decorated by President Barack Obama in May 2012. While these two gifted individuals were destined for greatness in civilian life, they willingly came to the defense of the nation when the circumstances demanded it. To their great credit, these two talented individuals made this sacrifice twice during the prime of their lives. America is indeed fortunate that the very best among us are willing to answer the call to action when it matters most. This kind of selfless dedication to duty and country is a defining characteristic of America's *Greatest Generation* and a hallmark of those who carry on the proud tradition of the United States Marine Corps. ➔

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