

United States Senate

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August 18, 2021

The Honorable Carlos Del Toro
Secretary of the Navy
U.S. Department of the Navy
130 Navy Pentagon
Washington, DC 20350-1300

Dear Secretary Del Toro,

I write today in follow up to our meeting on July 12, 2021, seeking your personal review of a Medal of Honor case for a South Dakota native, Captain E. Royce Williams, USN (Ret.). I am not requesting award of the Medal of Honor to Williams. Rather, I am asking for a Navy review of information I have received with a determination as to whether the information would support upgrade, of the Silver Star Medal awarded to Williams, to the Medal of Honor. That information came partially from a group of advocates seeking award of the Medal of Honor to Williams and partially from information uncovered by my staff. The information from both sources was apparently not available to the Navy when the Navy denied an upgrade of the Silver Star Medal to the Navy Cross.

Williams, who was born and raised in Wilmot, South Dakota, demonstrated heroic actions on November 18, 1952. On that day, at the height of air combat during the Korean War, then-Lieutenant Williams led an aerial engagement by Navy fighters from USS Oriskany to intercept seven Soviet MiG-15 fighters over the Sea of Japan. During this engagement, an unconfirmed number of MiG-15 fighters were downed and damaged, eventually earning Williams the Silver Star for his valorous leadership. Due to the initial classification of official information on the event, limited details had become public knowledge.

The documents provided by the advocates and additional documents uncovered by my staff provide the following information:

1. Recently declassified National Security Agency (NSA) documents.

- a. These NSA documents, declassified in 2016, revealed the MiG-15's were flown by Soviet pilots who were ordered *"to give battle"* and *"to increase speed and carry out assignment."* (Appendix A)
- b. Additionally, these intercepts report the Soviet MiG-15's were based at Vladivostok, Russia. This is the only overwater combat between the U.S. Navy and Soviet fighters in the Cold War as confirmed by former Acting Secretary Thomas Harker.

- i. Specifically, Acting Secretary Harker wrote to me in April 2021, stating, *"There is no question that this was a unique engagement in the history of the U.S. Navy – the only direct overwater combat between U.S. Navy fighters and Soviet fighters during the Cold War."* (Appendix B)

2. Navy Addendum describing a rushed and chaotic debriefing ready room setting.

- a. This declassified November 1952 air intelligence addendum describes distractions that occurred while debriefing returning pilots. Specifically, it noted, *"Considerable difficulty in debriefing of returning pilots was originally experienced. Distractions in the ready rooms were numerous."* (Appendix C)
- b. This aligns with Williams' affidavit noting a rushed ready room debrief that led to misinformation in the official account of the event, conflicting with his personal account. (Appendix D)

3. Excerpts from 1957 United States Naval Institute book authored by CMDRs Malcolm W. Cagle and Frank A. Mason titled "The Sea War in Korea."

- a. VADM J. "Jocko" Clark – Commander of Task Force 77 was quoted, *"The bunch (Soviet MiG-15's) which tangled with our planes were headed straight for the fleet, and only 35 to 40 miles away when initial contact was made. I can only surmise that they had orders to attack."* (Appendix E)
 - i. This aligns with the declassified NSA documents on Soviet intercepts.
- b. It's also significant that Williams and fellow pilots Rowlands and Middleton were invited to join VADM Clark on December 3, 1952, to meet with President-elect Eisenhower following the engagement. In "The Sea War in Korea," it is described as follows:
 - i. *"At the suggestion of Admiral Briscoe, I took along in my plane the three Oriskany pilots – Lieutenants Williams, Middleton, and Rowlands – who had fought the Russian MIGs so that they would be available in case Mr. Eisenhower might wish to see them. As it happened, he did."* (Appendix E)
 - ii. Enclosed is a photo of VADM Clark, Williams, Middleton, and Rowlands in a C-47 in route to Seoul, South Korea. (Appendix F)
- c. Lastly, there still remains uncertainty regarding how many Soviet MiG-15's were downed by Williams that day. A Navy report and the NSA documents mention possibly two downed, two damaged.
 - i. A USS Kearsarge (CVA 33) after action report mentions *"Two (2) MIGs and a possible third shot down."* (Appendix G)

- ii. This 1957 book, presumably screened and cleared by the US Navy for security concerns states:

"Official records credit Williams and Middleton with the destruction of one plane each, Rowlands with one damaged. This is undoubtedly conservative. Later compilations of radar plots and pilot interviews indicated a strong possibility that only one or possibly two of the original seven MIGs returned to base. Five or perhaps even six were either shot down directly, damaged so severely as to crash, or ran out of fuel on the way home." (Appendix E)

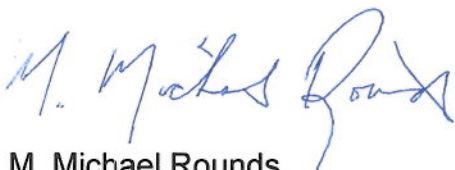
In addition to the detailed review of these documents, my office reached out to the Navy to request gun camera footage from Williams' F9F Panther aircraft from the time of the engagement as well as any and all records surrounding the November 18, 1952 engagement that might inform consideration of an award upgrade. (Appendix H) We made a similar request to the National Archives. (Appendix I) The Navy has been unable to locate the gun camera footage.

Through our extensive research on this matter, my staff and I have reason to believe there may be more documents still classified that may be helpful in the determination of this case. However, due to Williams' advanced age, I felt it was time for this case to be elevated to you for a timely review.

Thank you for considering this request on behalf of a hero who served our country during the Korean War.

As a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, I look forward to working with you during your tenure as Secretary of the Navy.

Sincerely,



M. Michael Rounds
United States Senator

Enclosures:

- Appendix A - Declassified NSA Documents from a 2016 FOIA Response
- Appendix B - Letter from Acting Secretary Harker dated April 7, 2021
- Appendix C - Page 39 of November 22, 1952 enclosure for inclusion in Action Report from U.S.S. Oriskany (CVA-34) – Air Intelligence section
- Appendix D - Affidavit from Williams' dated November 15, 2017

- Appendix E – Excerpts from "The Sea War in Korea" published in 1957 by the United States Naval Institute
- Appendix F – Photo of VADM Clark, Williams, Middleton and Rowlands in C-47 in route to Seoul, South Korea in December 1952 to meet President-elect Eisenhower
- Appendix G – Action Report from USS Kearsarge dated December 24, 1952
- Appendix H - Letter to Acting Secretary Harker from Sen. Rounds and Rep. Issa – February 2021
- Appendix I - Letter to United States Archivist Ferriero from Sen. Rounds and Rep. Issa – May 2021