SECNAV awards Navy Cross to retired Korean War veteran



SAN DIEGO (Jan. 20, 2023) – (from left) Adm. Samuel J. Paparo, U.S. Rep. Darrell Issa, retired U.S. Navy Capt. E. Royce Williams, Secretary of the Navy Carlos Del Toro, and Vice Adm. Kenneth Whitesell render honors during a ceremony awarding Williams with a Navy Cross Jan. 20. Del Toro was in San Diego for various fleet engagements, awards ceremonies and ship events.

Release from U.S. Navy

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SAN DIEGO – Secretary of the Navy Carlos Del Toro awarded the Navy Cross to retired Navy Capt. Royce Williams for his exploits during the Korean War at a ceremony at the San Diego Air and Space Museum, Jan. 20.

The Navy Cross is an upgrade of the Silver Star Medal previously awarded to then-Lt. Williams on May 7, 1953, while assigned to the ”Pacemakers” of Fighter Squadron (VF) 781, for combat action against seven Soviet Mikoyan Gurevich (MiG) 15 aircraft.

“Royce Williams was a Lieutenant in the United States Navy when he took the lead of an incredibly critical mission during the Korean War, resulting in the protection of Task Force 77 from enemy attack,” said Secretary Del Toro. “His actions almost 70 years ago earned him recognition, and he was awarded the Silver Star Medal. However, as the Secretary of the Navy, I have the authority to consider proposals to upgrade awards. Among the many cases I have reviewed, Captain Williams’ case stood out. It was very clear to me that his actions were extraordinary, and more closely aligned with the criteria describing a higher award…and sir, what a tremendous honor it was to tell you in person, that after all these years, your courageous actions would finally get the recognition they deserve.”

On Nov. 18, 1952, Williams was flying with two other members of VF-781 from Essex-class aircraft carrier USS Oriskany (CVA 34) when they encountered seven MiG-15 aircraft. Before they could engage, the team’s flight leader had to return to Oriskany due to a fuel pump issue, leaving only Williams and his wingman. After Williams downed the first MiG, his wingman chased the falling aircraft, and Williams found himself alone in air-to-air combat with the remaining MiGs.

“In the moment I was a fighter pilot doing my job…I was only shooting what I had,” said Williams in a previous account of the fight. “They had me cold on maneuverability and acceleration – the MiG was vastly superior on those counts to the F9F. The only thing I could do was out-turn them.”

Out-manned and piloting what was considered an inferior

aircraft to the MiG-15, Williams engaged the enemy for 35 minutes, shooting down four of them in the longest dogfight in U.S. military history. Additionally, no other American fighter pilot has ever shot down four MiG-15s in one fight.

The Navy Cross is only awarded to service members who distinguish themselves for extraordinary heroism in combat with an armed enemy force, and is the U.S. Navy's second-highest military decoration. Williams retired from the Navy in 1980, and his medals include the Navy Cross and two Distinguished Flying Crosses.