

## TED WILLIAMS AT WAR

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Ted Williams on board hospital ship off Korea, 1953.  
*Courtesy of the May Williams Collection.*

## INTRODUCTION

Ted Williams at war. Ted Williams was one of the very few major league ballplayers to serve in more than one war, and the only Hall of Fame player to serve in two wars.<sup>1</sup> Of those ballplayers who did serve, rather few saw actual combat. Ted Williams flew dive-bombing missions over enemy lines during the Korean War, his Panther jet slashing down from the skies while the enemy threw everything they could against him – anti-aircraft and small arms fire alike. These were harrowing missions; his Panther jet took hits on more than one mission.

Alex Rodriguez, like Ted, is the highest-paid player of his era. Imagine A-Rod, strapped into a single-seat jet aircraft, prepared to drop 250-pound and 500-pound bombs, sometimes pulling out of his dive at an altitude as low as 300 to 500 feet. Imagine Roger Clemens bringing his plane into a dive while enemy ground forces and anti-aircraft gunners – perhaps in Iraq or Afghanistan – fired hundreds of rounds at his plane. Imagine Barry Bonds, or one of today's premier players crash-landing his severely shot-up jet, watching it burn to a crisp – and then piloting a replacement plane on another mission less than 24 hours later. Ted Williams is truly one of a kind – an American hero.

There aren't too many athletes like a Ted Williams, a Jerry Coleman, or a Pat Tillman.

Ted Williams flew 39 combat missions in Korea. Every time his F9F jet streaked into a steep dive to attack the target of the day, Williams inhaled the fumes from his 20MM machine guns as he let loose with suppression fire to disperse Communist ground troops. Captain Theodore S. Williams USMC flew as John Glenn's wingman on a number of missions in Korea and, on more than one occasion, Williams felt the impact of bullets and secondary explosions on the fuselage of the plane he piloted. The day he was hit hardest, he had to wrestle with the control stick to keep the aircraft on course, after its hydraulics had been blasted out of commission. His radio was shot out, too, so he couldn't communicate. He couldn't get the wheels down, and so he brought in the plane on its belly, scraping down the runway at maybe 200 knots an hour.

That was Ted Williams at war.

In all, Williams lost most of five baseball seasons as a hitter – prime years – while serving as a Naval Aviation Cadet and in the United States Marine Corps.

The Korean War wasn't the only kind of war Ted Williams fought.

It seemed like Ted Williams was often at war – with Boston sportswriters, with (some of) the fans, with his draft board, with his wives, with "gutless politicians" – even with the pigeons he blasted at Boston's Fenway Park. He would agree he was even at war with himself a good portion of the time. Ted Williams was a dynamic, restless, goal-oriented individual, a "triple type A" personality with a relentless drive in pursuit of perfection at whatever field he chose to master. He did not suffer fools and had little tolerance for mediocrity.

David Halberstam, in *The Teammates*, wrote that Ted "won 33,277 arguments in a row... the undisputed master of contentiousness." He was opinionated, argumentative, combustible, and controversial – though when he wasn't busy explaining why he was right about this thing or that matter, he displayed an overpowering curiosity and a will to learn about that which he did not know.

People who really knew Ted often say that when he took up a new line of inquiry one day, by the time you saw him the next time – maybe even just the following day – he'd have become somewhat of an expert on the subject. One of his Marine Corps flight instructors, Bill Churchman, couldn't have been more impressed with Ted's native intelligence and single-minded determination to learn. "If you were to say to Ted, 'We're going to give you two years off from your present duties, and we want you to become a Shakespearean scholar,' he'd be the best in the world. You could use that same theory in any field – computers, law, whatever. He'd master it."<sup>2</sup> Ted would attack a subject that interested him. Former New York Yankee Tommy Henrich said that Williams could have been "the world's leading brain surgeon or nuclear scientist."<sup>3</sup>

Dr. Sidney Farber, the "father of chemotherapy" with whom Williams worked closely for decades as Ted lent his name to the Jimmy Fund fight against cancer in children, said that Ted "didn't just lend his name to the Jimmy Fund. He gave his heart." Dr. Farber also noted Ted's "keen understanding of the problems of research and the care of patients in a field regarded as hopeless. If he had gone to college or medical school, he'd have been outstanding there. Anything he entered, he'd have been a leader in that field. He has followed our research. He has asked questions about our work which amazed me, demonstrating as they did his instinctive understanding of the methods of research. He couldn't ask the questions because of anything he had read because there had been nothing printed about some of the things he asked about. This is pioneering. Yet, he follows the principles."<sup>4</sup>

Williams never lost an argument, Halberstam wrote, "because he was bright and he marshaled his facts and argued well, but also because he shouted all the time and appointed himself judge and jury at the end of each argument to decide who won."<sup>5</sup>

Of course, that approach wouldn't work in dealings with superiors in the United States Marine Corps. And Williams generally did respect authority. He never warred with umpires; this man who was so volcanic in some areas was never once tossed from a major league ballgame and indeed earned the respect of umpires by his refusal to show them up on, say, a called strike when they had erred and he knew he was right. Fellow ballplayers got along fine with Ted Williams. He never feuded or fought with players, either on his own team or those on opposing teams. To the contrary, he was always willing to help another hitter, often to the displeasure of Boston owner Tom Yawkey.

His ongoing war with the "knights of the keyboard" – particularly the Boston writers – and with the loudmouth fans who tried to ride him from the safety of the grandstand, may have served a purpose. Ed Linn argues that Ted thrived on being combative. "Despite his protestations," Linn wrote, "Ted was always unhappy when he was being ignored by his blood enemies, the sportswriters. 'When things got too quiet,' one of them says, 'you could always count on Teddy boy to do something to get himself back in the headlines.'"<sup>6</sup> Many of his public explosions came while Williams was mired in a slump, or frustrated with his play. The blowups may have served a purpose; he seemed to hit better after he stirred things up and got the juices flowing.

Though he never wanted to enter the military, in many ways his military service defines the Ted Williams legend.

And, though Ted Williams fought in all these many wars, this book focuses not on the battles of baseball, nor those of his personal life, nor the battles against salmon harvesters in Eastern Canada, but on that military service.

Ted Williams biographies always touch on his two stints in the service, devoting a chapter or two to covering these years of his life. Neither author nor fan would fail to wonder what career statistics Williams might have posted had he played uninterrupted during the prime seasons when he was 24, 25 and 26 years old, and had he played for the full 1952 and 1953 seasons. But any full biography has a lot to cover, when dealing with a life as full as that of Ted Williams. *Ted Williams At War* will look at his five years devoted to serving his country in the military, to accord this extremely important part of his life the full attention it merits.

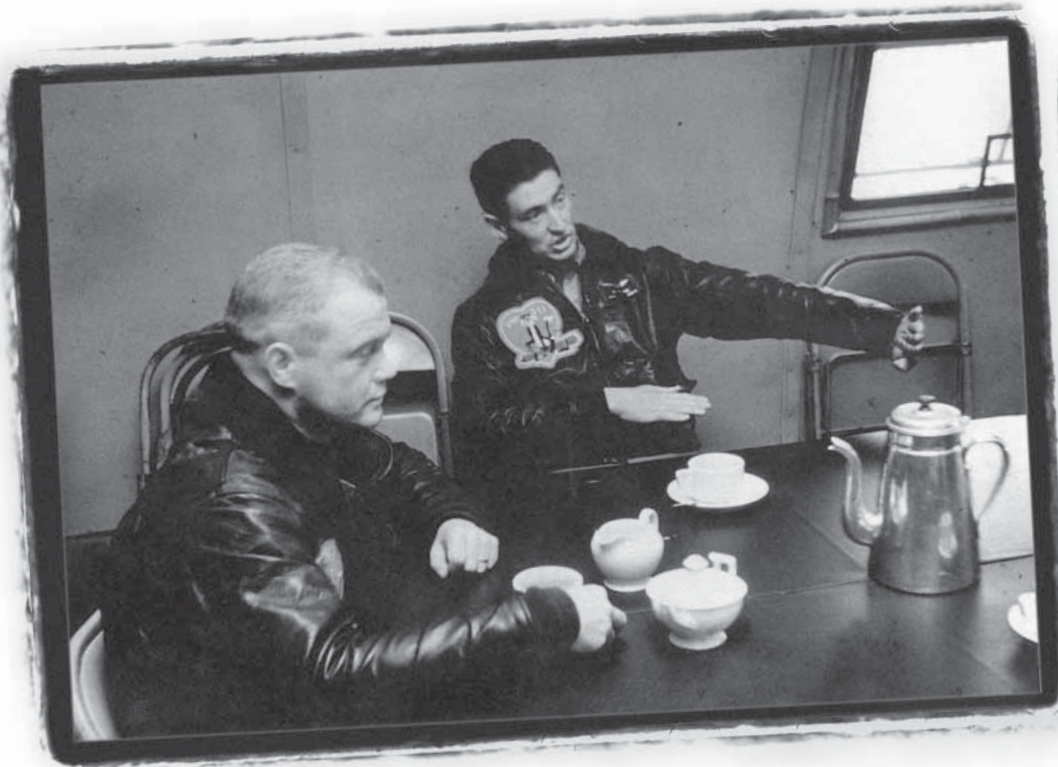
Many have said that "Ted Williams was the real John Wayne." Ted himself understood the drama of the day he crash-landed his plane, and saw it as the way any movie on his life should open.



Capt. T. S. Williams, USMCR.  
Courtesy of Claudia Williams.

## NOTES

- 1) *There are 24 Hall of Fame players who devoted at least a full season due to military service, according to Jim Hamilton of the Oneonta Star – three from World War I (George Kelly, Herb Pennock, and Eppa Rixey), nineteen from World War II (Luke Appling, Bill Dickey, Joe DiMaggio, Bobby Doerr, Bob Feller, Charlie Gehringer, Hank Greenberg, Billy Herman, Bob Lemon, Ted Lyons, Johnny Mize, Stan Musial, Pee Wee Reese, Phil Rizzuto, Red Ruffing, Enos Slaughter, Warren Spahn, Ted Williams, and Early Wynn), and two from the Korean War (Whitey Ford, Willie Mays, and Ted Williams). Non-player Lee MacPhail served in both World War I and II. Many others served, but either after their career (e.g., Mickey Cochrane and Christy Mathewson) or before their career in the majors began (e.g., Yogi Berra, Jackie Robinson, and Hoyt Wilhelm).*
- 2) *Interview with Bill Churchman, April 27, 1997.*
- 3) *Jim Prime and Bill Nowlin, Ted Williams: The Pursuit of Perfection (Champaign, IL: Sports Publishing, 2002), p. xi.*
- 4) *Mike Gillooly, "Dr. Farber Tells How Slugger Inspires Kids," Boston Evening American, January 10, 1958.*
- 5) *David Halberstam, The Teammates (New York: Hyperion, 2003), pp. 14, 15.*
- 6) *Ed Linn, Hitter (NY: Harcourt Brace, 1993), p. 135.*



Major John Glenn listens to squadronmate Captain Ted Williams describe a maneuver, airbase K-3, Korea, 1953.  
*Collection of Bill Nowlin.*

## HOW THE MOVIE STARTS

*"Now I'll tell you how it's supposed to start... It's in a fighter plane, see, flying, from the pilot's eye, over KOREA. Seoul. And it's flying, slow and sunny and then bang WHAM BOOOOMMM the biggest goddamn explosion ever on the screen, I mean BOOOOMMM. And the screen goes dark. DARK. For maybe ten seconds there's NOTHING. NOTHING. And then when it comes back there's the ballpark and the crowd ROARING... and that's the beginning."*

Ted Williams<sup>1</sup>

If there were ever a film made of Ted Williams' life, that's how he envisioned it opening. It starts with a dive-bombing mission during the Korean War, Captain Theodore S. Williams (service number 037773) in his F9F-5 Panther jet. From 26,000 feet, sometimes their progress seemed slow, though the jets were streaking north at over 500 miles per hour. It was sunny, but the temperature outside the cockpit was minus 65 degrees Fahrenheit, and any pilot who plunged into Sea of Japan waters off the Haeju Peninsula had to be rescued quickly. Splashing down into the near-freezing salt water, you would lose consciousness within 30 to 60 minutes even if you were wearing the rubber survival suit. At two hours, there was about a 50% survival rate. Without the suit, you might have as few as two or three minutes.<sup>2</sup> There were scores of pilots on this mission – a "max effort" combining the Marines, Air Force, and Navy – but every one of those pilots was very much alone in his aircraft. Ted's eyes scanned the ground below through his flight goggles – the famous eyes that had already helped win him four American League batting titles. It was relatively silent, except for the occasional crackle of static and the minimum amount of chatter over the radio.

The hilltops below looked peaceful from five miles high. So did the clouds below and the clear blue late morning sky. It was 10:52 a.m. on 16 February in the year 1953.

Then Major Tom Sellers of VMF-115 called for the strike, and Captain Williams' division leader, Major Marvin K. Hollenbeck, gave the word and the four jets from VMF-311 bore to the right and dipped down, heading into their dive. As the jets streaked earthward, the ground rushing closer, Williams and the others could see enemy troops scattering from their personnel shelters below, running from one building to another, as the Marine pilots opened up suppression fire with their 20MM cannon and began to fire bursts of rounds. There was some scattered ground fire, some bullets heading up toward the jets as they came in low – 1,000 feet or less, to drop their 250-pound bombs.



Man's Magazine cover, April 1961.  
Courtesy of Bill Nowlin.

Then suddenly, there is silence again as the Panther pulls out of its dive, having delivered its payload, climbing, heading downriver and following the preplanned route out toward the ocean. For three or four seconds, the hills looked peaceful again, and the blue sky looked serene. But Williams had a problem. It wasn't a noise, not a WHAM BOOOOMMM! It was a whole lot of bright red lights on the instrument panel. That was not something any pilot ever wanted to see. "When I pulled up out of my run, all the red lights were on in the plane and the damn thing started to shake. The stick stiffened up and was shaking. I knew I had a hydraulic leak. Fuel warning light, fire warning light, there are so many lights on a jet that when anything serious goes wrong the lights almost blind you. I was in serious trouble."<sup>3</sup>



Ted Williams' jet after crash at K-13, Suwon, Korea.  
*Photos courtesy of Frank Cushing (top) and Larry Niswenden (bottom).*

Ted barely made it back alive. He crash-landed his plane at an Air Force base. Unable to lower his wheels, or effectively work the flaps to brake the plane's speed, his jet scraped down a few thousand feet of tarmac before grinding to a halt. The noise was terrific, raw metal screeching on the concrete runway as the plane tore along at 200 knots an hour. Sparks flared out behind the skidding craft, with a cloud of smoke billowing out behind. The moment it cut off hard to the right and ground to a stop, out Ted jumped, running for cover before his plane was engulfed in flame.

He had to get transport back to his own base on another aircraft. The one he'd been flying was toast.

The next morning, he was up again on another mission for Marine Air over Korea.

Ted Williams was at war. Ted Williams was at war with the Communists in Korea, and with the "gutless politicians" who sent him there. He battled on the home front as well: he battled on the ball field and he battled in his personal life.

Sometimes he enjoyed the combat. Sometimes he went too far. Anger could energize him; it could also get him in hot water. He loved to dish it out, and he respected most those who could dish it right back. He enjoyed a good battle of words, and he enjoyed battling the bonefish and tangling with the tarpon. He enjoyed trying to outwit both the man on the mound and the Atlantic salmon on the Miramichi River in New Brunswick.

This is the story of Ted Williams at war, the nearly five years carved out of his career as a major league ballplayer. It is a story of the training, those 39 combat missions, and how Ted Williams became regarded as a military hero for the service he rendered his country. Shot down once, and his plane badly damaged another time, he survived and came back to baseball.

As the BOOOOOMMM renders the screen black, we hear the crowd ROARING. It's August 9, 1953. Fenway Park in Boston, and the crowd is 27,000 strong. The score is 5-2, Boston's down, and it's the bottom of the seventh inning. Suddenly, the volume rises in crescendo and becomes overwhelming. The Kid is coming out to hit. The picture clarifies again and we see the wrists of the hitter grinding his hands on the handle of the bat. Grinding so hard, you'd swear sawdust was going to fall to the field. The count ran to 3 and 1. A Mike Garcia fastball heads straight in. Then another BOOM – but this time it's the sound of a wooden baseball bat hitting the pitch, hard. They say the ball sounded different, louder, when Ted hit one just right. A long home run sails up into the seats in right field, and we see Ted Williams – head down – cross the plate, having rounded the bases. The hero is back from the war. The prodigal son has returned.

Next we cut to a much quieter (but a little shrill) WHIRRRRRRRRRR sound – a fishing line sailing out on a cast, and then, almost imperceptible, the sound of the fly hitting the water. All of a sudden it's the quiet and solitude of fishing the boneflats in the Florida Keys.

That's where he was when he got the news he was being recalled to the Marines.

Fishing.



Ted on beach near Pohang.  
Photo by Ed Buchser.

#### NOTES

- 1) *Richard Ben Cramer, What Do You Think of Ted Williams Now? (NY: Simon & Schuster, 2002), p. 36.*
- 2) *Information from a U.S. Navy flight surgeon, via communication from Jon D. Mendes, June 4, 2004.*
- 3) *Ted Williams, My Turn At Bat (NY: Fireside: 1969, 1988), p. 179.*



Ted takes the oath of office, enlisting in the Navy's V-5 program, May 22, 1952.  
*Photograph courtesy of the Cleveland Public Library.*