

# Stanley R. Essex, Jr. (1931- Navy Plane Captain, Korea; Warbird Restorer, Model Builder

*"It's a labor of love. I don't do it for the acclaim. I just hope future visitors will learn something about the sacrifice and sense of duty shared by America's pilots—and their mechanics."*

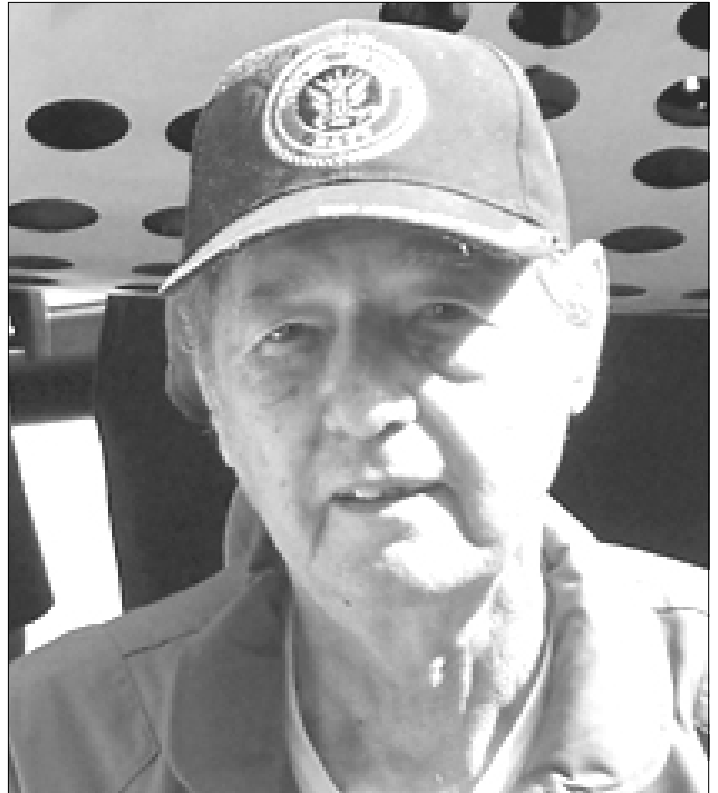
-Stan Essex

Over the past 22 years, Warwick resident and Navy Korean War veteran Stan Essex has virtually single-handedly restored two wrecked warbirds to display condition: a WWII Navy Hellcat fighter for the Quonset Air Museum, and the F9F Panther known as the "Ted Williams Airplane" for the Rhode Island Aviation hall of Fame/USS John F. Kennedy project. Along the way, he has worked on a number of other aircraft restoration projects, and was instrumental in the construction of an award-winning 30-foot-long model of the aircraft carrier *USS Wasp*.

Today, he is working on restoring the superstructure of another 30-foot model—the battleship *USS Nevada*, used as a prop by Paramount Pictures in their Pearl Harbor films as well as "Winds of War".

Essex was born in Amesbury, MA on March 26, 1931. His father was a single dad and a career sailor, so young Stan lived with his grandmother while his dad was at sea. When his grandmother died in 1940, he moved to Warwick to live with his father's brother's family. During World War II his father became Chief of the Boat on the aircraft carrier *USS Essex*.

Stan graduated from Samuel Gorton High School, and married his childhood sweetheart, Carmela Venterino, in 1950. He had always loved planes—as an 8-year-old he had clipped pictures of fighter planes from the paper and pasted them onto pieces of cardboard—so just prior to the outbreak of the Korean War he enlisted in the Navy. He went in under its High School Airman Recruit Program, with a guarantee of aviation training and an aviation billet. He was in training in Memphis when the war started, and soon found himself deployed aboard the *USS Bon Homme Richard*, launching combat missions over Korea.



As did most young men in wartime, he grew up in a hurry. He became a plane captain (Navy-speak for crew chief) for an F-9 Panther jet fighter.

An aircraft of "firsts," the sleek Grumman F9F Panther was the first jet-powered fighter to see widespread service with the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps. It was the first Navy jet to shoot down an enemy aircraft, the first Navy jet to shoot down an enemy jet-powered aircraft, and the first jet aircraft used by the Blue Angels aerobatic team.

*(Left): F9F-2B Panthers from VF-781 fly by USS Bon Homme Richard (CV-31) during their 1951 Korean War deployment. The photo was apparently taken by one of the F9F-2P's from VC-61. (Below): An F2H-3 Banshee from VF-71 is catapulted off the Quonset-based USS Bennington (CV-20) in 1953. Essex was a plane captain on both these aircraft types.*





*During Stan's work on the Panther restoration, a number of candid photos were taken. The resemblance to some iconic Ted Williams F9F photos is uncanny. Check out these four photos in that context.*



The Panther entered service in May 1949. They were none too soon. On August 6, 1950, Panthers were the first carrier jets to see action in Korea and performed almost half of all attack missions for the Navy and Marine Corps.

Even then, Stan's eye for detail and technical skill reaped benefits. He recalls noticing that the hard slam caused when the Panther hit the deck on landing tended to raise the paint on rivets and weaken the tail assembly. He started reinforcing the spine of the fuselage, just in front of the tail section. Word spread among the fleet, and the practice was adopted in other squadrons.

After Korea, Essex finished his Navy service with Carrier Air Wing 7 at Quonset, spending most of his time with the Hell's Angels of VF-71. He was the plane captain on an F2H-3 Banshee piloted by Jack Oliver Snipes on June 24, 1953 when Snipes was killed in a head-on midair collision during a night practice run.

He was offered the chance to finish out his tour in VC-12, a composite squadron with an anti-submarine as well as an airborne early warning mission. The squadron transferred in to Quonset from Norfolk flying TBM Avengers, and was then transitioned to AD-3W Skyraiders.

"They were prop aircraft," sniffed Stan. "I was a jet mechanic, and I wanted no part of those props."

So he finished out his tour in the education department.

Using the GI Bill, he learned electronics and avionics, and went back to work at Quonset's Overhaul and Repair facility as a civilian. Over the next several years he expanded his technical skills and experience, working in a number of disciplines to include marine avionics.

"I got out of that business when I realized that installing avionics while swinging from a bos'n chair 40 feet up the



*Stan works on the Hellcat seat at the Quonset Air Museum.*



*This CIA Trader was the last plane flown out of NAS Quonset in 1974, and Captain Ed Klapka (R) was the pilot. Essex and Klapka welcome the plane back to the Quonset Air Museum in 2000.*



*Riveting a new piece of sheet metal on the Panther's fuselage.*



*Stan plays the role of Ted Williams in the cockpit of the F9F, 2011 Bristol 4th of July parade.*

most of a sailboat was a younger man's job," Stan observed.

He eventually operated his own television servicing and repair business.

In 1989 Stan became one of the first members of the Quonset Air Museum, and was heavily involved in the recovery and retrieval of a crashed Hellcat off the coast of Nantucket.

He became vice president, then president of the air museum.

But when the Rhode Island Aviation Hall of Fame group announced the acquisition of the Panther and the plan to restore it as the Ted Williams Airplane, Stan was hooked. "That's my baby," he said. "I never thought I would ever have the chance to work on a Panther again."

Essex has worked on other planes, but this job is special. The frosting on the cake was the Ted Williams connection. His idol, Ted Williams, flew the same type of plane as a Marine fighter pilot in Korea.

As a boy, Stan himself had dreamed of playing ball. Listening to a transistor radio, he followed the career of the Red Sox slugger, his hero. He even flirted with a career on the mound, pitching for a while in an amateur league in Providence.

"Ted was quite a talent," Essex says. "He was as good a pilot as he was a baseball player. It is an honor to be able to work on this project dedicated to his accomplishments."

# ANATOMY OF A PANTHER



*After the crash landing at Kalamazoo, 1997.*



*Ready for auction at Kalamazoo, 2005.*



*Former Congressman Bob Weygand welcomes the Panther to RI, 2006.*



*Nose section, stripped for work, 2007.*



*Nose section under restoration, April, 2010.*

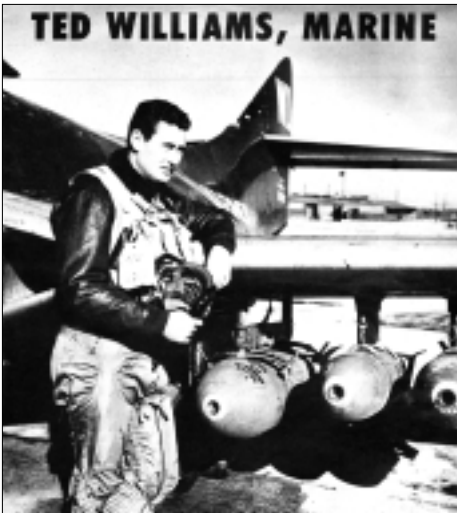


*Christie Gibson puts "Ted" back in the cockpit, Pawtucket Red Sox Fanfest, McCoy Stadium 2006.*



*Ready for the Bristol 4th of July parade, 2011.*

# APPEALING TO BASEBALL FANS-- THE "TED WILLIAMS AIRPLANE" PROJECT



*On Feb. 19, 1953, on a bombing run far above the 38th parallel, Williams' F-9 Panther was hit by small arms fire and started leaking hydraulic fluid. With his plane shaking badly and on fire, his control panel lit up with warning lights, and his radio dead, Williams followed a fellow pilot back to base, flying without hydraulics and wrestling his stick all the way. Approaching the landing field, an on-board explosion blew off one of the wheel doors and Williams was forced to land his crippled jet at 225 mph and on one wheel. When the F-9 finally came to a stop at the end of the runway after skidding over 2,000 feet, Williams walked away from the burning wreck as firemen hosed it down with foam. (ESPN)*

RIAHOF founder Frank Lennon first came up with the idea of a "Ted Williams Airplane" in 1997, while he was running an aviation museum in upstate New York.

"Although Grumman built more than 1,300 of these fighters, only nine are still in existence," said Lennon, "And of those, only two are privately owned. We had feelers out to friends on the warbird circuit for years."

Williams himself supported the idea, and agreed to become involved once a Panther was acquired. However, his death in 2002 forced a revision of the plan.

The concept was not revived until November, 2005 when Lennon had an opportunity to acquire one of the two privately-owned F9F Panther fighter aircraft in the United States. This particular Panther had been flying on the air show circuit for a number of years, winning many awards for the combination of the quality of its restoration and its rarity. The plane crash-landed near the Kalamazoo, MI airport in 1997, and firefighters tore open the cockpit to save the owner/pilot's life.

The injured owner/pilot promptly donated the wreck to a local air museum. (The actual plane Williams crash-landed in Korea was not so lucky; he walked away from his wreck, which burned in place. See photo and caption to the right.)

"Plans to restore the Kalamazoo aircraft to flying condition never materialized, and when the F9F was put up for auction we seized the opportunity and purchased it with private funds," said Lennon.

"It was in such bad shape that everyone who wanted to restore it said, 'Forget it,' after they saw it," volunteer Stan Essex says. But he thought he could fix it.

USS Saratoga Museum Foundation, Inc. brought the disassembled aircraft from Michigan to Rhode Island in 2006. The plane's restoration continues under the auspices of the Rhode Island Aviation Hall of Fame/USS John F. Kennedy aircraft carrier project.

Thanks to an agreement with the Ted Williams Museum, now located at Tropicana Field in Tampa, Florida, the plane will become the centerpiece of the New England branch of that museum. "We will have a permanent display of Ted Williams artifacts and memorabilia as part of our aircraft carrier attraction," said Lennon. "The Florida museum has promised to provide enough baseball material so that our visitors can make the link between Ted's military and baseball careers," he concluded.

To raise money for the aircraft restoration and the Williams exhibit, the museum has run three Red Sox Legends golf tournaments in recent years. These tournaments have featured more than 20 former Red Sox ballplayers, such as Luis Tiant, Dick Drago, Rick Miller and many others. The Boston Red Sox organization has endorsed the project, and the Red Sox Foundation has supported it financially.

Thanks to the untiring efforts of Stan Essex, RIAHOF's F9F Panther, complete with Ted Williams' unit and aircraft markings, now appears regularly in parades and at events.



*The late Lou Gorman, former Red Sox General Manager and Rhode Island native was Honorary Chair of this project until his death in April, 2011. He helped get the Ted Williams Airplane restoration project on the radar of Red Sox management. Official endorsement and support followed, to include billboard announcements at Fenway Park such as the one shown at left.*