

Robert Lloyd Primrose

The register of Norway baseball players includes a number of athletes who either played for pay or flirted with the professional game, and many more who deserved that opportunity. But of all of the names on that list, Robert Primrose may be the most notable. Although he died at a young age, and while he never signed a professional baseball contract, none of Norway's ballplayers lived more fully while sacrificing so much.

Robert Primrose was born on February 10, 1929, eight months before the Wall Street Crash and the start of the Great Depression, to Lloyd and Esther (Trojovsky) Primrose. His family included two sisters, Susan and Gayle, and one brother, Harold, who later achieved extraordinary success in both baseball and education. One of Hal Trosky's nephews, "Pinky" – as he was known until he graduated from college – took up baseball almost as soon as soon as he was able to grip a ball.

Primrose attended grade school at St. Michael's in Norway and, as a teenager, transferred to the Norway Consolidated School. He finished high school as class salutatorian in 1946, but in addition to his academic success he also managed a paper delivery route for the Cedar Rapids Gazette, worked at the Norway Creamery wrapping butter by hand, and represented the American Legion at "Boys State" in his senior year. At that convention, Robert was also elected Iowa State Auditor. In his few remaining moments, he also played on the school basketball team and with the band.

Then there was baseball. In addition to all of his normal activities, Primrose played for both the high school team, leading the Tigers to their first-ever district titles and sectional berths, and for *Iowa Manufacturing* in the M&J (Manufacturers & Jobbers) league.

In the fall of 1946 Robert entered the State University of Iowa (now simply the University of Iowa) and the Reserve Officers Training Corps. His time in college was, perhaps, even busier than his high school years, and by the time he graduated in 1950, he had served as ROTC Battalion Commander, had earned three varsity letters on the baseball team, been named first-team third baseman on the Big-10 all-district squad, and played for several semi-pro teams including the Amana Freezers (1947), the Lakes team from Wall Lake, and Lake View (1948 and 1949).

As for so many others, graduation forced Primrose to make some career decisions. His hitting had improved during his time at Iowa, and before his senior year in college he was invited to a tryout camp run by the Philadelphia Phillies. Robert was awarded a new glove for being named "Most Outstanding Player" of the camp by scout Eddie Krajnik but, in the end, the Phillies did not offer a contract. As a senior, his batting average in the Big-10 had slipped to below .200, and there weren't many professional scouts filling the grandstands to look at the young infielder.

Without a clear path to professional baseball, he accepted a commission as a Second Lieutenant (2nd Lt) in the nascent United States Air Force in July, a choice that put him on a path that separated him from the game. That summer, in an August 21 interview with a local newspaper, Primrose said, "If I got a good chance to play pro ball, I would have tossed both the commission and degree aside. But my hitting right now won't merit anything."

The unflinching self-awareness no doubt helped him excel in aviation, and he earned his pilot wings in September 1951 at Williams Air Force Base. Within six months, on February 12, 1952, he arrived in Korea as a replacement pilot in the F-80 *Shooting Star*.

The life of an attack pilot has been described as long periods of boredom, punctuated by brief moments of sheer terror. For newly promoted First Lieutenant Primrose, the opportunity to fly into actual combat must have provided plenty of both. The F-80 was the first American combat jet, and was normally used as a bomber. Carrying two 1600-lb bombs and four ROCKEYE (cluster bombs) on a normal bombing mission, the *Shooting Star* had room for only 1100 rounds of .50 caliber ammunition for any additional air-to-air fighting, so Primrose's missions generally consisted of a primary attack/bombing phase, followed by air-to-air duties if necessary.

Although he was generally reticent about his combat experience, Robert did share what he considered his most thrilling flight in Korea with a reporter in the mid-1950s. Having been in-theater for a few months, he and his wingman (another F-80) had finished their planned attack run and were enroute to their base when he was re-tasked in-flight. A division (four aircraft) of older, propeller-driven P-51 Mustangs, under United Nations control, had been searching for a downed American plane when they reached low-fuel state. Primrose's section (two aircraft) of F-80s was diverted to relieve the Mustangs and assumed control of the operation.

Almost instantly the division leader interrupted on the radio, advising that they'd been jumped by a division of Soviet-built MIG-15s, jet fighters that were faster than the Mustangs and could out-maneuver any jet in the American inventory. The saving grace for the P-51s was that their swept-wing attackers carried cannons instead of guns, so the MIGs had a limited firing rate. Their need to get into an ideal shooting position, against the slower but more nimble propeller-driven fighters, gave Primrose enough time to reach the melee. The straight-winged *Shooting Star* was at an acknowledged disadvantage against the MIG-15, and both Primrose and his wingman knew it, but both ignored that reality.

Dropping through the cloud deck, they immediately entered a 'fur ball' of eight airplanes, all maneuvering in a tiny slice of airspace - at high speed - to both avoid colliding with any of the other aircraft and, in the case of the Mustangs, to avoid being shot. Without legitimate air-to-air weapons, Primrose and his wingman still jumped into the fight, flying right at the MIGs while trying to get into a firing position of their own. The F-80s were relentless, and eventually chased away the MIGs while allowing the P-51s to dive for the safety of the treetops and return safely to base.

Primrose's instinctive actions saved four American pilots and aircraft that afternoon. In all, during his tour, Robert flew 101 missions and 145 combat flight hours in only eight months in country, well ahead of the normal pace. Most importantly, he returned home alive.

Following the war, Primrose returned to Craig AFB in Selma, Alabama, as a flight instructor. He married an Air Force nurse, Arlene "Skip" Dunlap, on May 1, 1954. Their first daughter, Susan, was born two years later, and was soon followed by Robert, Mary, and youngest son John.

Primrose was promoted to Captain in 1957, and was then selected to join a very small and elite cadre of pilots trained to fly the U-2 reconnaissance aircraft. In the late 1950s, the U-2 was new and classified and, flying at altitudes over 60,000 feet above the surface of the earth, it was as much spacecraft as it was airplane. The mere existence of the plane was unknown to the general public until Francis Gary Powers was shot down in his U2 by the Soviets in 1960, an event that precipitated a major international diplomatic tiff. His selection into the program marked Primrose as one of the Air Force's finest aviators.

Primrose was assigned to the 4080th Strategic Reconnaissance Wing. On October 9, 1962, the 4080th was ordered to prepare to execute Operation "BRASS KNOB", a secret high-altitude aerial reconnaissance of a potential Soviet buildup on Cuba. Once personally sanctioned by President Kennedy, the Wing would assume surveillance duties from the Central Intelligence Agency. After initial flights on October 14 and 15, the eleven pilots in the unit began operating almost continuously over the island. The intelligence gained during the next month of missions provided irrefutable evidence to the world that the Soviets were staging ballistic missiles - aimed at the United States - in Cuba. Historians generally agree that that photographic proof led to the resolution of the crisis and prevented global nuclear war.

Two years later, on September 18, 1964, now-Major Primrose had just returned from a stint as U-2 detachment command in Panama. Scheduled for a routine training flight over the western United States, his U-2 took off at 7:30 AM from Davis-Monthan Air Force Base in Tucson, Arizona. Nearly six hours later, Primrose checked in with the control tower for clearance to enter the local air traffic pattern. He repeated his landing clearance back to the controller, a standard procedure, in preparation for a routine recovery, and at 1:20 PM he rolled left to begin his final approach.

The tower observers watched helplessly as U-2, side number 6690, then abruptly reversed to the right, the left wing now pointing skyward, and augured into a right-hand descending turn. The impact site was only one-

quarter mile from the end of the runway. The investigation of the cause of the crash, and the disintegration of the aircraft, proved inconclusive. Perhaps Primrose suffered a heart attack or a stroke while landing, or maybe there was a wind-shear, or perhaps the plane simply failed.

While Robert Primrose never played baseball professionally, he was certainly one of Norway's more talented amateurs, and his professional life and his legacy remain a source of pride to the Air Force, to Norway, and to the nation. In a letter from Primrose's commanding officer to his parents, written on the day of the mishap, the Colonel noted both Robert's sacrifice and his professional accomplishment, and a magnificent list of awards that included the Distinguished Flying Cross (with an Oak Leaf Cluster), the Air Medal (with seven Clusters), the Korea Service Medal, the United Nations Service Medal, the National Defense Service Medal, and the Armed Forces Expeditionary Medal.

The funeral, a week later, filled St Michael's, forcing more to stand outside than could fit inside, and the Strategic Air Command Color Guard (from Omaha) paraded the flag in celebration and honor of his life and his sacrifice. He is buried in the cemetery in Norway, Iowa, and rests in a grave immediately next to that of his parents.