

News and stories

This Flamethrower Operator is the Last Living Medal of Honor Recipient from the Pacific Theater

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Jesse Greenspan | [History.com](#)

On February 23, 1945, Hershel “Woody” Williams crawled toward a string of Japanese guard posts with a 70-pound flamethrower strapped to his back. His Marine Corps unit had suffered heavy casualties since arriving on the island of Iwo Jima a few days earlier and had now become bogged down under intense machine-gun fire.

“As we attacked, they would just mow us down, and we would have to back off,” Williams tells HISTORY. Even tanks failed to make any progress.

In desperation, a superior officer asked Williams to try his luck with a flamethrower. Williams selected four Marines to provide cover fire, two of whom wouldn’t survive, and proceeded to singlehandedly take out one concrete pillbox after another over the course of the next four hours. At one point, he climbed atop one of the dug-in forts and fired through the air vent, killing the Japanese troops inside.

On another occasion, he incinerated a group of Japanese soldiers charging him with bayonets. When a flamethrower ran out of fuel—each lasted for only a few blasts—he would return to American

lines to secure a new one and then re-enter the fray. Williams describes those four hours as somewhat of a blur, though he does vividly recall machine-gun fire ricocheting off the back of his weapon, as well as a pillbox going up in smoke.

Thanks in part to Williams' actions, the Marines renewed their advance and within weeks had taken control of the island.

At the time, Williams says, "I didn't think I'd done anything special at all. I was just doing my job." The military, however, felt differently. When World War II concluded, Williams was invited to the White House, where President Harry Truman presented him with the Medal of Honor, the highest U.S. military decoration, for "unyielding determination and extraordinary heroism in the face of ruthless enemy resistance."

Williams recalls Truman stating at the ceremony that he would rather have this award than be president. ("I'll trade you," one of Williams' fellow Medal of Honor recipients apparently quipped.) "I was absolutely scared to death," Williams says of meeting the president. "I couldn't think of anything. I couldn't say anything."

Williams has been working with veterans organizations ever since, including a 33-year stint with the federal Veterans Administration. His latest venture is the Hershel Woody Williams Medal of Honor Foundation, a nonprofit that provides scholarships to Gold Star children and facilitates the establishment of Gold Star family memorial monuments. At age 94, he estimates he'll travel 200 days in 2017, for memorial dedications and events like the christening of the USNS Hershel "Woody" Williams, a Navy ship named in his honor.

Williams' longevity puts him in rarefied company. Of the hundreds of Medal of Honor recipients from World War II (many of whom received the award posthumously), only four remain alive. He is the sole member of the quartet who fought in the Pacific Theater, as well as the sole Marine.

Born on October 2, 1923, Williams grew up on a dairy farm in the

tiny community of Quiet Dell, West Virginia. The youngest of 11 siblings, only five of whom reached adulthood, partly due to the devastating 1918 flu pandemic, he recalls attending elementary school in a one-room schoolhouse. Each morning, he would bring the cows in from pasture and milk his portion of them by hand. Yet, with the Great Depression raging, “money was just nonexistent. You could work all day for 10 cents.”

After dropping out of high school—the school was seven miles from home, a commute he sometimes made on foot—he followed a brother into the Civilian Conservation Corps, a Depression-era work relief program. Williams expected to stay in West Virginia but was instead packed off to Montana, where he was stationed on December 7, 1941, when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor.

Two of Williams’ brothers subsequently entered the Army, but he was determined to join the Marines instead. “They were wearing that brown ugly Army uniform,” Williams jokes. “I didn’t want to be caught dead in that thing. I wanted to wear dress blues.”

But when the 5-foot-6-inch Williams tried to enlist, he was rejected for falling short of the Marines’ height requirement at the time. Undeterred, Williams tried again in early 1943, soon after the height requirement was dropped, and this time he was accepted. “My thought was, ‘I’m going into the Marine Corps to protect my country and my freedom,’ never dreaming I’d end up in the South Pacific, because [prior to the war] I didn’t even know we had a South Pacific,” Williams says.

Following boot camp in San Diego, plus some additional training, Williams shipped out to the island of Guadalcanal, which the United States had recently finished seizing from Japan. While there, he learned how to use a flamethrower and was put in charge of a six-man flamethrower demolition unit. Williams saw his first combat in July 1944, participating in the Battle of Guam.

He recalls the initial few days of fighting as particularly brutal, as U.S. troops struggled to advance from the beachhead to the top of a ridge. Upon gaining the high ground, they then swept across

miles of jungle, attempting to pick off the remaining Japanese who had camouflaged themselves in the thick foliage. "We lost a lot of Marines simply because we didn't know where they were," Williams says. "We couldn't see them."

By re-taking Guam, which had been in Japanese hands since December 1941, the United States gained a base from which its B-29 bombers could reach Tokyo, explains Richard B. Frank, an Asia-Pacific War historian who will accompany Williams next year on a tour of Pacific battle sites. Moreover, Frank says, the United States wanted to sever Japanese lines of communication, plus it felt an obligation to liberate the local populace, which had remained steadfastly loyal to America.

Frank notes that Williams' experience tracks with his own research on Guam. "It was an extremely ferocious fight for the first few days," he says, "but eventually they were basically ground down."

From Guam, Williams traveled in February 1945 to the tiny, pork chop-shaped island of Iwo Jima, the site of a well-fortified Japanese airbase. "They told us that probably we would never get off the ship," Williams says. Contrary to previous battles in the Pacific, the Japanese let U.S. troops land relatively unmolested. However, they then rained down heavy fire, and pinned so many Marines along the beach that Williams' 3rd Marine Division couldn't find a place to disembark. (Williams and his cohorts spent a whole day in landing craft, traversing huge waves and taking turns vomiting over the side.)

The Japanese knew they probably couldn't win on Iwo Jima, Frank explains, but "they wanted to make it as difficult, costly and time-consuming as possible." The United States, on the other hand, Frank says, wanted Iwo Jima as a base for fighter aircraft and as a refuge for damaged B-29s returning from bombing campaigns to the Japanese mainland.

Upon finally securing a toehold on Iwo Jima, Williams' 3rd Division was positioned at the head of the operation and told to split the opposition in two. Williams recalls a difficult struggle to advance

across an airfield and then running into the concrete guard posts, which were reinforced by steel rods and impervious to aerial bombardment. By the time he assaulted the string of pillboxes, for which he would earn the Medal of Honor, all the other members of his flamethrower demolition unit had been killed or wounded.

Williams would continue fighting, receiving a Purple Heart for injuries suffered on Iwo Jima that March. He later returned to Guam and trained for a planned invasion of the Japanese mainland that was rendered unnecessary by Japan's surrender in August 1945.

With the conflict now over, Williams took his first-ever plane ride from Guam to Hawaii and then shared a flight to San Francisco with American prisoners of war who had just been liberated. "They almost looked like skeletons," Williams says. "They had lost so much weight. They were real thin, their bones were all sticking out, and their jaws were all sunken. But even though they were in that shape, they were the happiest group I've ever seen because they were on their way home from unknown torture."

After that, Williams boarded a cross-country train, surprising his fiancée at her West Virginia home and then proceeding to Washington, D.C., for the Medal of Honor ceremony on the White House lawn.

The award turned Williams into a reluctant public figure, who utterly failed in his first attempt to engage an audience, at a parade. "It was the shortest speech in history," laughs Brent Casey, Williams' grandson and the executive director of his foundation. "He just said, 'uh, uh' twice and then sat down."

Gradually, however, Williams learned to speak eloquently of his wartime experiences and to use his platform to advance causes he believes in. After retiring from the VA, he maintained a demanding schedule, running a veterans home, teaching Sunday school, raising show horses, and serving as chaplain of the Congressional Medal of Honor Society, among other activities. His foundation, meanwhile, has erected 26 Gold Star family memorial monuments—with about 50 more on the way—since its establishment in 2010.

Williams has attended every single dedication in dozens of states.

“He inspires so many people,” says Casey. “Most 94 year olds would be relaxing and enjoying retirement and sitting on the front porch watching traffic, but he just refuses to do that. He’s going to make the most of every hour of every day.”