

News and stories

History at Sea: Iwo Jima Medal of Honor Winner, 94, Lauds 'Miracle' at San Diego Ship Christening

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Chris Stone | [Times of San Diego](#)

The Marine Corps may have initially rejected Hershel Woodrow “Woody” Williams because he was too short, but he stood a mile tall Saturday.

Surrounded by his daughters, top local military officers, four other Medal of Honor recipients, survivors of the Pearl Harbor attack on the USS Arizona, Gold Star families and potential crew members, Williams, 94, was showered with praise that brought a tear to his eyes.

Dwarfed by the imposing 784-foot, 90,000-ton expeditionary sea base that will carry his name, Williams spoke of the “miracles” of receiving the Medal of Honor from President Harry Truman and Saturday’s christening at General Dynamics NASSCO — which he called an event “far beyond my ability to comprehend.”

Daughters Travie and Tracie Ross, sponsors of the ship, christened the vessel with champagne bottles, one of which proved hard to crack. That made Williams crack a big smile.

Speakers at the christening included Sen. Joe Manchin of West Virginia; Maj. Gen. Eric M. Smith, commanding general of the 1st

Marine Division; Rear Adm. William J. Galinis, Program Executive Officer of Navy Ships; Vice Adm. Dixon R. Smith, deputy chief of Naval Operations for Fleet Readiness and Logistics; and Rear Adm. Dee L. Mewbourne, commander of Military Sealift Command.

In a video shown at the beginning of the ceremony, Williams said, that in 1997, a friend and fellow Marine suggested the idea of a ship bearing Williams' name.

"Seriously you'd be wasting your time because you've got to be dead to have a ship named after you, and I'm not gonna die," he told his friend.

Then in 2015, "out of the blue," he got word from Navy Secretary Ray Mabus that a ship would indeed be named in his honor.

"If I could have had a heart attack, I think I would have," Williams said in the video. "I guess it's the first time that someone from West Virginia has been privileged to have their name on a ship."

He added: "This is a miracle that can only happen one time in a life," calling himself "a little farm boy from West Virginia."

Sen. Joe Manchin, D-West Virginia, journeyed cross country to hail Williams as the "greatest friend that the state of West Virginia has ever had."

"There is not a better person and more deserving human being than my friend Woody Williams," he said. "Woody is a person who not only signed up to serve, he never quit serving. So he did his 20 years, and then after that he kept serving even more. To this day he is still serving."

In 2013, Williams and his family founded the Hershel "Woody" Williams Medal of Honor Foundation to recognize and honor Gold Star families in all states.

Throughout the ceremony viewed by hundreds, speakers cited his exceptional actions on Feb. 23, 1945, that led to him receiving the

Medal of Honor for valor in World War II.

Williams fought in a four-hour battle on Iwo Jima, in which he prepared demolition charges and used flamethrowers to open a gap in Japanese troops.

Williams is the last surviving recipient of the nation's highest military honor from the Battle of Iwo Jima. He also was awarded the Purple Heart.

"We know that Feb. 23, 1945, only marks the start of Woody's journey as a true American hero," said Kevin Graney, president of General Dynamics NASSCO.

"Today we honor Woody for a lifetime of service," Graney said. "Woody has dedicated countless hours speaking to veterans groups, schoolchildren, church and civic groups. Woody's story demonstrates true American ideals — courage, sacrifice, patriotism, citizenship, integrity and commitment."

Front and center to witness the ceremonies were Medal of Honor recipients Charles Kettles, Robert J. Modrzejewski, Jay R. Vargas and John Baca — all from the Vietnam War era. Three of the five surviving members of the sunken battleship Arizona from Dec. 7, 1941, also attended — Lauren Bruner, Ken Potts and Donald Stratton — all in their mid-90s.

Gloria Valdez, deputy assistant secretary of the Navy for ship programs, spoke of Williams' "unyielding determination and extraordinary heroism against enemy forces on Iwo Jima.

"Much like Woody's undaunted courage, intrepid fighting spirit, and unwavering devotion to duty, for decades to come the USNS Hershel 'Woody' Williams will bravely sail our seas and proudly serve our country," she said.

Speaking about the ship, Graney said: "We laid the field from this ship on Aug. 2, 2016, and told Woody that we would work hard to make this ship worthy of his name wherever it sails."

About this classification of ship — expeditionary sea base, of which there are three others in operation — Graney said, “We see our Navy and Marine Corps experimenting with these ships in ways that will change the way we operate for many decades to come.”

Rear Adm. Dee Mewbourne, commander of the Military Sealift Command, said the ship provides a “competitive edge against potential adversaries.”

“With the rise of near peer competitors, we can no longer presume dominance in space, cyber, in the air, sea and under the sea,” Mewbourne said. “New operational concepts and innovative thinking are needed to reach military goals.”

Like her sister ship the Lewis B. Puller, operating today in the Middle East, the USNS Hershel “Woody” Williams Expeditionary Sea Base will provide U.S. military leadership with “necessary options,” Mewbourne said.

The Hershel “Woody” Williams will support a variety of missions, including special operations, air mine countermeasures, counterpiracy and humanitarian efforts.

A crew of 250 will staff a 52,000-square-foot flight deck with MH-53 helicopters and MV-22 tilt rotor aircraft.

Ship construction is on schedule and sea trials may occur head of time. The ship is expected to be delivered to the Navy in February 2018.

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