

News and stories

Medal of Honor recipient recalls Iwo Jima for NAS Marines

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Carol Owens | [The Meridian Star](#)

Hershel Woodrow "Woody" Williams, 94, went from being raised on a dairy farm to being presented the Medal of Honor in 1945 at the White House by then President Harry Truman.

He was the youngest of 11 children living in Quiet Dell, West Virginia when he tried to enlist in the Marine Corps in 1942, but was told he was too short for service.

Things changed for him when the height regulations changed and he successfully enlisted in the Marine Corps Reserve in Charleston, West Virginia on May 26, 1943.

A large crowd of Marines and staff had the opportunity to listen to Williams tell about his remarkable career Thursday in the gym of Naval Air Station Meridian.

Stepping up to the podium, the first thing Williams said was, "I am a Marine gunner."

He then told the men and women, "I am going to ask some questions and I want you to answer with, 'Yes Sir.'"

"Are you proud to be an American," he asked?

He received a resounding, "Yes Sir."

"The reason I am here is God wasn't ready for me and the Devil didn't want nothing to do with me," Williams said.

As Williams told about his military service and the reason he was awarded the Medal of Honor, it became obvious he had been through enough that proved God had not been ready for him.

He related his early days in boot camp and a hard lesson he learned.

"We had a 12-gauge shotgun growing up on the dairy farm," Williams said. "Well you didn't use the term 'gun,' in the Marine Corp."

But he mistakingly had, which cost him a night in the rain naked, holding his weapon in the air and saying, "This is my rifle, this is my rifle. You will never forget your days of boot camp," he said.

Williams completed his recruit training at Marine Corps Recruit Depot in San Diego, California. Upon completion, he was sent to Camp Elliott training center where he received instruction as a demolition man and in the use of flame throwers. Little did he know that his flame thrower training would save lives days after he landed for battle in Iwo Jima on Feb. 21, 1945.

"We went on a huge ship, had no idea where we were going," Williams said. "We had just captured Guam."

He described Iwo Jima as being two and a half miles wide and five miles long.

"We couldn't imagine any problem on Iwo Jima," Williams said. "We had no intelligence about the island and were told it would take 3-5 days to take the island. Two divisions went in. We were the third division and we couldn't see the island. It was midnight when we

arrived and didn't get off, (the boat.) until the next day."

He described trying to get off the boat and the men fighting 8-10 foot waves trying to get on the island before reaching it before daylight.

"We got on shore before noon and there were fences up so you couldn't see much."

There were 22,000 Japanese soldiers waiting for them.

"They had put sand on top of pillhouses," Williams said. "There was reinforced concrete and they had a 8-10 inch opening to stick their weapons through. They had 14-19 miles of underground tunnels. All the bombings we had done before had very little effect because they were underground."

After encountering the reinforced concrete pillhouses, Williams said, he went alone with his 70-pound flamethrower to attempt the reduction of devastating machine gun fire from the unyielding positions. He was covered by only four riflemen and he fought for hours under terrific enemy fire, repeatedly returning to his own lines to prepare demolition charges and obtain serviced flame throwers. He would return back to the front, frequently to the rear of hostile emplacements, to wipe out one position after another.

His quick action caused his attention to be drawn to seeing a wisp of smoke that alerted him to the air vent of a Japanese bunker. He approached close enough to put the nozzle of his flame thrower through a hole, killing the occupants of the bunker. On another occasion he was charged by enemy riflemen who attempted to stop him with bayonets and he killed them with a burst of flame from his weapon.

The day of Williams' heroic actions was the same day two flags were raised by soldiers on Mount Suribachi, which was photographed and ran on front pages of newspapers around the nation.

"Old Glory was flying in enemy territory and it lifted the spirits of America," Williams said. "I'm here and I would not be wearing this medal without the other men with me that day. I had no knowledge of this medal and the impact it would make on my life. I could not have received it without my Commanding Officer and four other Marines. I was just doing my job."

Williams said the four-hour ordeal on Iwo Jima was, "like a dream, most of which I can't remember. I couldn't have received this medal without all those individuals, especially the two Marines who gave their life. I wear it in their honor."

Williams fought through the remainder of the five-week-long battle even though he was wounded in the leg by shrapnel, for which he was awarded the Purple Heart. He was transferred to the Marine Barracks, Naval Training Center, Bainbridge, Maryland for discharge. He was honorably discharged Nov. 6, 1945 and in 1948 he reenlisted in the inactive Marine Corps Reserve and was discharged Aug.4, 1949. His final rank at retirement was Chief Warrant Officer 4.

The day President Truman presented him the Medal of Honor, there were 27 medals awarded. Only 13 survived to receive them. The Medal of Honor is given to those who risk their life above and beyond the call of duty in action against enemy forces.

He has served as a Veterans Affairs counselor, chaplain of the Congressional Medal of Honor Society for 35 years and now works with his non-profit Hershel Woody Williams Congressional Medal of Honor Education Foundation, Inc. This was established to honor Gold Star families, relatives, and Gold Star children who have sacrificed a loved one in the service of their country. Williams serves on the Foundation's Founders Advisory Board. When talking about Gold Star families, he said, "Let's not forget those who made bigger sacrifices than us."

Some might have seen Williams at this year's Super Bowl LII on Feb. 4, 2018, where he and 14 other living Medal of Honor recipients participated in the coin toss. Williams is the only living Marine Corps

Medal of Honor recipient selected to do the official coin toss for the game and Super Bowl LII was dedicated to the recipients.

Traveling with Williams to NAS Meridian was Randy C. Reeves, under secretary for Memorial Affairs.

After his talk, Williams took time to see and take photos with every Marine who wanted to shake his hand and get a photo, taking time to talk to them and offer encouraging words.

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Address

Hershel Woody Williams
Medal of Honor Foundation
12123 Shelbyville Road, Ste 100
Louisville, KY 40243

Contact:

chad.graham@hwwmohf.org

