

News and stories

Navy christens Hershel "Woody" Williams, honoring World War II Medal of Honor hero

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Carl Prine | [San Diego Union-Tribune](#)

With the World War II hero seated in the shadow of its looming gray hull, the [U.S. Navy](#) on Saturday christened the Hershel "Woody" Williams, adding another vessel to America's growing arsenal in the Pacific.

The ship's namesake, retired Marine Chief Warrant Officer 4 Williams, received the nation's highest decoration for combat bravery for his valorous actions on Iwo Jima in 1945.

Covered by only four riflemen, for four grueling hours Williams wielded six 70-pound flamethrowers against a series of Japanese pillbox bunkers, dodging machine gun fire and returning repeatedly to snatch a fueled-up weapon.

Charged by Japanese soldiers brandishing bayonets, he engulfed them in fire and kept up his attack, clearing the way for Marines to take the rest of the island.

During his address on a packed General Dynamics NASSCO shipyard pier, the 94-year-old downplayed his battlefield courage.

He instead recalled the sacrifices made by fellow Marines who died

on the volcanic island. He mentioned the "miracles" that played out over the 72 years since he fought there, moments in a life of service that brought the Navy to name a vessel after a "West Virginia country boy."

He called his namesake ship "an item of war," but said it really was launched to help keep peace in the world.

"We're not an aggressive people. That's not our nature," he said.

In his speech, U.S. Sen. Joe Manchin, D-West Virginia, recollected a push that spanned two decades to get a ship named after Williams, one that ended in 2015 when former Navy Secretary Ray Mabus marked the planned Expeditionary Sea Base for him.

With a large mountaineer contingent in the crowd, Manchin called Williams the "greatest friend the state of West Virginia ever had" and lauded the retired Marine as a quiet servant of veterans who "never asked for anything in return."

With its keel laid on Aug. 2, 2016, the \$498 million ship that bears his name is expected to enter service in the Pacific Ocean for Military Sealift Command in February, following a series of sea trials.

Called the "Pacific Pivot," the American military continues to beef up its arsenal of warships, support vessels and stealth jets during an era of heightened tensions on the Korean peninsula and rising maritime rivals such as China and Russia.

Although it can be used to hunt sea mines or launch Special Operations Forces, the Expeditionary Sea Base Williams is more likely to serve as a floating tarmac, warehouse or command and control headquarters.

"This Expeditionary Sea Base will provide our leadership with options," said Navy Rear Adm. Dee Mewbourne, the commander of Military Sealift Command.

The sister ship to the Lewis B. Puller -- currently operating in the Persian Gulf with the Navy's 5th Fleet -- the Williams boasts a 52,000-square-foot flight deck that can deploy four MH-53 and MH-60 helicopters or the Marines' tiltrotor MV-22 Ospreys.

Built like an oil tanker, it can stow 25,000 square feet of vehicles and equipment, plus 380,000 gallons of fuel and 250 personnel.

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