

News and stories

VA hospital renamed to honor Woody Williams

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Dave Lavender | [Williamson Daily News](#)

HUNTINGTON - At the ceremony to officially rename the VA Medical Center after 95-year-old Hershel "Woody" Williams, a packed crowd stood and vigorously applauded, several Marines gave a hearty "hoorah" and a wave of well-timed thunder rumbled through as if God himself was giving a hearty amen to such a faithful and honorable man.

The Sunday afternoon ceremony unveiled the sign and new plaque at the now-named Hershel "Woody" Williams VA Medical Center, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center that is a fully accredited 80-bed acute medical and surgical care facility offering primary and subspecialty outpatient care, including rehabilitation and mental health services.

The Hershel "Woody" Williams VA Medical Center serves more than 30,000 veterans in a primary service area that includes 10 counties in West Virginia, two counties in southern Ohio and 12 counties in eastern Kentucky.

"I know I am not very handsome, but you are looking at one of the most fortunate 95-year-old men who exists in America - and all because of America," said Williams, who is the last living Medal of Honor recipient from West Virginia and the last from World War II's

Battle of Iwo Jima.

Before giving a short speech, Williams - who in the past year conducted the Super Bowl coin toss and has had a Navy ship named in his honor (the USNS Hershel "Woody" Williams) - heaped praise on the West Virginia delegation of U.S. Sens. Joe Manchin (D) and Shelley Moore Capito (R), and U.S. Representative Evan Jenkins (R). The delegation took Williams' grandson Brent Casey's suggestion to name the VA in his honor.

"They are the wheel that turned to make this possible," Williams said, asking the crowd to stand and honor them.

Through U.S. House Resolution 3363, the Huntington VA Medical Center was officially renamed for West Virginia native and Medal of Honor recipient Hershel "Woody" Williams. President Donald Trump signed H.R. 3663 on June 15. Manchin, Capito and Jenkins gave Williams a framed copy of the resolution.

Williams spent 33 years at the VA and retired as a Department of Veterans Affairs service officer. He recalled barely finding his way to the VA following the war after he got a telephone call offering him a job for more than \$2,900 a year.

He had never been to Huntington. But in 1946, the Quiet Dell native and his wife of three months, Ruby, loaded up her father's 1937 Chevy, grabbed what he called a not-so-good West Virginia road map and drove seven hours from the Fairmont area to Huntington, where they would both work at the VA.

"We used to sneak in the tunnel to have a kiss at noon," Williams said with a grin.

Williams said he was almost as nervous Sunday afternoon as he was when he arrived on top of the hill 72 years ago, and he could not have imagined that the VA Medical Center would grow this big.

"I wanted to go back a few years because this place has always been a place of caring and of healing, and it has grown into a

magnificent treatment facility where every day lives are saved, bodies are healed, veterans are made well and it is all done with love and commitment and dedication to serving someone else," Williams told the audience. "This place and the Department of Veterans Affairs are truly fulfilling the motto 'to care for them who shall have borne the battle.' "

Following music by a combined military band, the National Anthem by Angela Johnson, a service song medley by Aretha Van Horn and the invocation by Chaplain Randy White, master of ceremonies Kenneth Mortimer (the VAMC associate director) welcomed the packed crowd to the VA "on a wild and wonderful West Virginia summer day."

All of the speakers from Manchin, Jenkins and Capito to Major General James Hoyer of the WV National Guard and Dr. Raymond Chung, acting director of the Veterans Integrated Service Network 5, mentioned Williams' life-long sacrifice in service to others - from his heroism during Iwo Jima, and his 33 years at the VA to his most recent endeavor: The Hershel Woody Williams Medal of Honor Foundation, a nonprofit that provides scholarships to Gold Star children and helps establish Gold Star family memorial monuments.

Manchin called him a true patriot who always put country and others first and who was cut from the same cloth of Manchin's Senate colleague John McCain, who recently passed.

Capito, whose father was also in WWII, gave Williams a newspaper clipping she found about Williams that her father had kept from a July 12, 1968, article in the Weirton Daily Times about Williams being honored by the American Legion.

She said it is not uncommon to run into Williams, who is always on his way somewhere else to help others. In 2017, Williams traveled about 200 days a year for memorial dedications and events.

Jenkins said although there is no pause in Woody Williams' energy or when he recites the Pledge of Allegiance, he hopes visitors to the

VA who may not be familiar with Williams' heroic WWII service and his life of service to others, will pause at his plaque to read more about a true American and West Virginia hero.

With the service happening just a couple days before 9/11, Jenkins also asked the crowd to also pause to remember Huntington native physician Dr. Paul Ambrose, who died on Flight 77 during the 9/11 attacks, and to pause to honor Command Sgt. Maj. Timothy Bolyard, a 42-year-old Thornton, W.Va., native who died in Afghanistan last week.

Major Gen. James A. Hoyer, the adjutant general of the WV National Guard, traveled with the Williams family and Ron Wroblewski to Norfolk, Va., last week to tour the USNS Hershel Woody Williams. Hoyer said he isn't sure why Williams friended him, but it has been one of the greatest joys of his life.

"As an officer I will always have the deepest respect and admiration for your courage, your valiant actions on the battlefield and all that meant to your fellow Marines, to all of us and to the war effort and to preserving all of our freedoms," Hoyer said. "As parents, Amy and I want to thank you for taking the recognition of that valiantry and that action and turning it not to yourself but to turning it every day to take care of someone else. It is a true testament for me to watch, but it is exceptional example for my two young sons who serve our nation both in uniform and in civilian careers. For them to be able to watch the selfless sacrifice that you and your family give to our veterans and to the rest of the nation it is absolutely exceptional what you do."

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