



U.S. Marine Corps body bearers from Marine Barracks Washington, D.C., carry the casket of Chief Warrant Officer 4 Hershel “Woody” Williams at the West Virginia State Capitol rotunda during memorial services 3 July 2022 in Charleston, West Virginia. (Photo by 1st. Lt. Mallory S. VanderSchans, U.S. Marine Corps)

Hershel Woodrow “Woody” Williams

2 October 1923–29 June 2022

The Medal of Honor, the Nation’s highest military decoration, is awarded to “members of the United States Armed Forces who distinguish themselves through conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of life above and beyond the call of duty.”¹ The award is so prestigious that of the sixteen million Americans who served during World War II, only 473 service members were awarded the Medal of Honor.² The last remaining member of this elite group, Marine

Corps veteran Hershel “Woody” Williams, passed away 29 June 2022 at the age of ninety-eight. Williams first saw combat on the island of Guam, but he received the Medal of Honor for his actions on Iwo Jima while serving as a flame-thrower operator in a demolition detachment with 1st Battalion, 21st Marine Regiment, 3rd Marine Division, on 21 February 1945.

According to Williams’s award citation, when U.S. tanks were attempting “to open a lane for the infantry through the network

of reinforced concrete pillboxes, buried mines, and black volcanic sands, Cpl. Williams daringly went forward alone to attempt the reduction of devastating machine gun fire from the unyielding positions. Covered only by riflemen, he fought desperately for four hours under terrific enemy small-arms fire and repeatedly returned to his own lines to prepare demolition charges and obtain serviced flamethrowers, struggling back, frequently to the rear of hostile emplacements, to wipe out one

position after another. On one occasion, he daringly mounted a pillbox to insert the nozzle of his flamethrower through the air vent, killing the occupants and silencing the gun; on another he grimly charged enemy riflemen who attempted to stop him with bayonets and destroyed them with a burst of flame from his weapon. His unyielding determination and extraordinary heroism in the face of ruthless enemy resistance were directly instrumental in neutralizing one of the most fanatically defended Japanese strong points encountered by his regiment and aided vitally in enabling his company to reach its objective.”³

Williams was awarded the Medal of Honor by President Harry S. Truman on 5 October 1945 along with ten other marines and two sailors. He served in the Marine Corps for seventeen years before retiring as a chief warrant officer 4. He subsequently worked in the Department of Veterans Affairs and devoted his life to supporting Gold Star families.

Williams was further honored in 2018 with the dedication of the Hershel “Woody” Williams VA Medical Center in Huntington, West Virginia, and by the U.S. Navy in 2020 with the commissioning of the USS *Hershel “Woody” Williams* (ESB-4). He will be remembered as an American hero and a member of the Greatest Generation. ■



Notes

1. “Description of Medals: Medal of Honor,” U.S. Department of Defense, accessed 7 July 2022, <https://valor.defense.gov/Description-of-Awards/>.

2. “WWII Veteran Statistics,” The National WWII Museum, accessed 7 July 2022, <https://nationalww2museum.org/war/wwii-veteran-statistics>; “Medal of Honor Recipients of World War II,” The National WWII Museum, accessed 7 July 2022, <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/topics/medal-honor-recipients-world-war-ii>.

3. “Hershel ‘Woody’ Williams: Medal of Honor Citation,” National Medal of Honor Museum, accessed 7 July 2022, https://mohmuseum.org/medal_of_honor/hershel-williams/.



Top: Medal of Honor recipient Hershel “Woody” Williams, 27 July 2019. (Photo courtesy of the Department of Defense) **Bottom:** Two Marine privates hit the deck to throw a scorching inferno at the mighty defenses that blocked the way to Iwo Jima’s Mount Suribachi in February 1945. They are Pvt. Richard Klatt (left) and Pfc. Wilfred Voegeli. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Marine Corps)