

Memorial Day Memories: Medal Of Honor Recipient Says His Decoration Belongs To Those Who Never Made It Home

by Dr. Mark DePue
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It was February 23, 1945, when Corporal Hershel "Woody" Williams of the 3rd Marine Division earned an honored place in Marine Corps history. His unit was fighting its way

north on a tiny patch of land known as Iwo Jima. After only three days of combat, his company of 275 Marines now had only 17 effectives. Of the seven flamethrower operators in the unit, Woody was the only one still in the fight.

Their situation was desperate when the company commander gathered the remnants of his command together in a shell crater. Could Woody take out some of the enemy pillboxes that were pinning them down, the commander asked him. "I'll try," Woody replied.

Few targets on the battlefield were more conspicuous and foreboding to the Japanese than a Marine with a flamethrower strapped on his back. Four Marines were chosen to support Woody, tasked to provide suppressive fire so that he could crawl close enough to unleash the flamethrower's deadly liquid.

"During the course of four hours," Woody explained during a December 2019 interview, "time didn't have any meaning at all. the course of four hours, I took one flame thrower with me when I first started, and I got five more somehow, and eliminated seven ... of those pillboxes."

For his actions that day, Woody received the Medal of Honor, the nation's highest medal for valor. Two of the four Marines sent out to protect him died in the process, and the other two were wounded.

Here is how Woody's award citation reads.

"Quick to volunteer his services when our tanks were maneuvering vainly to open a lane for the infantry through the network of reinforced concrete pillboxes, buried mines and black, volcanic sands, Corporal Williams daringly went forward alone to attempt the reduction of devastating machine-gun fire from the unyielding positions. Covered only by four 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 flame throwers, 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 flame thrower through the air vent, kill the occupants and silence 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."

Only Woody survived the experience unscathed. Two weeks later he was also wounded after sprinting forward under intense enemy fire. He dove into a shallow depression not deep enough for his entire body and took a piece of shrapnel in his exposed leg.

We rightly focus on the heroic deeds of people like Woody. But for his part, he would rather have us remember those equally brave souls who guarded him while he wielded the flamethrower, a job for which two of them paid with their lives.

Woody remembers well the day he received the Medal of Honor from President Harry S. Truman in a special ceremony at the White House. It was a thrill that a country boy from Quiet Dell, W. Va., will never forget, but more important to him was what the Commandant of the Marine Corps, General A. A. Vandergrift, himself a Medal of Honor recipient, told him the next day.

“‘That medal does not belong to you. It belongs to all those Marines who did not get to come home’,” Woody recalls General Vandergrift saying. The general also told him, “‘Don’t ever do anything that would tarnish that medal.’”

Woody has spent the rest of his life striving to live up to those words, always remembering the other men who died protecting him, and the 400,000 other men and women of his generation who made the ultimate sacrifice for our freedoms today.

Woody Williams, at 96, is the last surviving Iwo Jima Medal of Honor recipient. He now travels the country talking about his World War II experiences, inspiring audiences wherever he goes.

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