Admiral Nimitz Historic Site
National Museum of the Pacific War

Center for Pacific War Studies

Fredericksburg, Texas

Interview with

Mr. Hershel Woodrow *"Woody"* Williams
(World War II - U.S. Marine Corps - Iwo Jima)
Congressional Medal of Honor Recipient
Date of Interview: February 18, 2005

Foreword

CITATION TO ACCOMPANY AWARD OF THE MEDAL OF HONOR TO HERSHEL WOODROW WILLIAMS

Rank and organization: Corporal, U.S. Marine Corps Reserve, 21st Marines, 3d Marine Division. Place and date: Iwo Jima, Volcano Islands, 23 February 1945. Entered service at: West Virginia. Born: 2 October 1923, Quiet Dell, W. Va. Citation: For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty as demolition sergeant serving with the 21st Marines, 3d Marine Division, in action against enemy Japanese forces on Iwo Jima, Volcano Islands, 23 February 1945. 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, Cpl. Williams daringly went forward alone to attempt the reduction of devastating machine gun fire from the unyielding positions. Covered only by 4 riflemen, he fought desperately for 4 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. Cpl. Williams' aggressive fighting spirit and valiant devotion to duty throughout this fiercely contested action sustain and enhance the highest traditions of the U.S. Naval Service.

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Today is February 18, 2005. We are here in Fredericksburg, Texas, at the Fredericksburg Inn & Suites to interview Mr. Hershel Woodrow "Woody" Williams, a Marine who served on Iwo Jima, and this interview is done in support of the Oral History Program of the National Museum of the Pacific War, Center for War Studies, for the preservation of historical information related to World War II.

Mr. Cox: May I call you "Woody?"

Mr. Williams: Please do.

Mr. Cox: Woody – I certainly appreciate you taking the time to visit with us concerning your experiences. I would like to get a little background information on you; where you were born, when you were born, a little about your siblings and where you went to school. Then we will take it from there.

Mr. Williams: I was born in the State of West Virginia in a little community called Quiet Dell. It was just a little country farm community about 7 miles east of the bigger city that we called "the big city" – Fairmont, West Virginia, and we were farm/dairy people. We had a dairy farm and we delivered milk, butter, eggs, and all of the dairy products to people in the big city of Fairmont.

Mr. Cox: How many cows did you have?

Mr. Williams: We were milking 30-35.

Mr. Cox: By hand.

Mr. Williams: By hand. That was long before milkers became available. There were eleven of us that ended up part of the family, but only five of us actually survived to reach adulthood. The others, for whatever reason, just didn't make it. So we ended up with one daughter and four sons, who grew into adulthood. The older brothers, one of them got to go to high school, the other two never did, and I began going to highschool at Fairmont East High, which I consider my home high school, and the home high school of my wife. We didn't know each other at that time. I was in high school and things were very rough in the way of trying to get to school. There was no bus services, so you got to school whatever way you could. I had a brother that after he got out of high school decided that he wanted to do something else and he joined what was known in those days the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). He was assigned to a place in West Virginia, a CCC Camp. He was having it pretty good; he was being paid about $21 a month and he was eating three good meals, and had a nice place to sleep. I thought that might be all right. So I decided that was what I was going to do. I joined the CCC, but I wasn't quite as fortunate as he. They sent me to a camp in West Virginia, but I was only there a short time and then they sent me all the way to Whitehall, Montana. It was clear out of the world as far as I was concerned. That is where I spent my time in the CCC. I was there when WW II started on Pearl Harbor Day.

Mr. Cox: So did you finish high school?

Mr. Williams: Never did. When I came back home I took the GED test and received my GED, but then about 59 years later I was called one day to come to the Capital and West Virginia had picked up a program that I believe was started in Massachusetts where they were awarding regular high school diplomas to anyone who was in World War II at a high school age – either quit high school and went into

the service or was in the age factor where if they had been in high school they went into the service. So they called me and I went to the Capital and they gave me the first high school diploma that was awarded in West Virginia under this program, and then I became part of a program where we went all over the State of West Virginia awarding World War II veterans their regular high school diploma. Some of them had never actually been in high school. It was a very emotional thing. There were many of those fellows who were so thrilled that tears just rolled down their cheeks when they were recognized in that way. So, I do have my regular high school diploma.

Mr. Cox: A little late.

Mr. Williams: It took me 59 years, but I do have it. In our farm community, and in our area, we had no military influence whatsoever – just none. There were very few people in the military, but we had two fellows in the community who, in order to make a living, joined the Marine Corps. I have no idea why they picked the Marine Corps, but they did. Back in those days, the Marine Corps had a requirement that you had to be 5'8" or better in order to join the Marine Corps because they were looking for people pretty close to the same stature and height. They went into the Marine Corps and they would come home on their furloughs, and they only got one 30-day furlough a year back then; they had to enlist for six years. They would come home and they were always in their dress blues because at that time all of the Marines wore dress blues. I was in the 11 - 12 - 13 year old age bracket, and those fellows would come home, and of course they were very sharp, very polite, very immaculate – everything just shined. I guess I decided that if I ever went in the military, I had no desire, no plan, but that’s what I wanted to be. So when World War II came along and I was out in Montana, and

practically everybody in the camp said, “Hey, we got to go to war, our country has been attacked.” I had never heard of Hawaii; I had no idea where it was. I requested my discharge from the CCC.

Mr. Cox: What year was that?

Mr. Williams: That was in 1942. I tried to go in right after my 18th birthday. My Father died when I was 9 years old; my Mother wouldn’t sign the paper under age because she too had no military knowledge, and as far as she was concerned the only reason you went in the military was to fight and get killed, and she wasn’t going to have any part of that. After my 18th birthday, in 1942, I went in to enlist. I wanted to go in the Marine Corps. The recruiter – I have no idea what his rank was now, but the recruiter looked at me and said, “What can I do for you, or what do you want?” I said, “I want to go in the Marine Corps.” He said, “We can’t take you.” I said, “Why? I’m a pretty good specimen of a farm boy.” He said, “You are too short.” So they wouldn’t take me. I went on back to the farm and continued doing what I had been doing. The height requirement was removed in early ‘43, so I went in in May of ‘43.

Mr. Cox: Where did you take your Boot?

Mr. Williams: That is another strange story. I should have gone to Paris Island, S.C. because that was the Boot Camp for all of the East Coast, but with the East Coast being the heavier populated area, at that time, more so than the West Coast, they were getting so many people into the Marine Corps that they just couldn’t handle everybody. They set up temporary Boot Camps, etc., but they still couldn’t handle it, so they started a troop train down in Florida/Georgia, some place down there, and came up through Tennessee, North Carolina, West Virginia, Ohio and Indiana, and loaded that troop train down and we ended up in San Diego, California. That is where I took my Boot Camp. I’m a “Hollywood Marine”. That is what they called us.

Paris Island boys give us a hard time.

Mr. Cox: I had never heard that terminology.

Mr. Williams: Is that right?

Mr. Cox: Yes.

Mr. Williams: Yes, Hollywood Marine. Nothing like Paris Island, you know – the swamps and mosquitoes there, etc. So, they gave us a hard time.

Mr. Cox: After you got through your Boot then where did you go from there?

Mr. Williams: After finishing Boot Camp they put me in an infantry training thing for a short period of time, and that was at Camp Elliott, California, which no longer exists. I took my basic infantry training at Camp Elliott, and then we shipped overseas.

Mr. Cox: Is there any weapon in particular that you specialized in?

Mr. Williams: In my infantry training I was still just a rifleman. I carried an M-1 rifle. Everyone in the Marine Corps is taught to be a rifleman first. When I got overseas they first sent us to a replacement outfit in New Caledonia. From there they assigned us to units. When we got to New Caledonia they assigned some of us to the 3rd Marine Division. At that time the 3rd Marine Division was on Bougainville, taking Bougainville, and they had left from Guadalcanal to go to Bougainville, so we ended up at Guadalcanal in preparation to being shipped to Bougainville to fill in for the Marines that we had lost, but fortunately before they could get us all shipped out the Marines on Bougainville secured the island, won the battle, and came back to Guadalcanal. I joined the 3rd Marine Division there on Guadalcanal. That is where my MOS changed, my military specialty changed, from rifleman to special weapons and they established for the first time the flamethrower demolition special weapons unit. I don’t know whether I was selected or volunteered, but anyway, I ended up in that group.

Mr. Cox: What particular special weapon did you have?

Mr. Williams: My primary was flamethrower, with a secondary of demolition because you basically had to know both things. I began training on the flamethrower. Once you got a little proficient in that then you started learning demolitions and how to blow things up after you burned them up.

Mr. Cox: How much does a flamethrower unit weigh?

Mr. Williams: They weigh 70 pounds.

Mr. Cox: That is when they are loaded?

Mr. Williams: When they are loaded with fuel, yes. If you just open it up and fire all the fuel, it will last about 72 seconds.

Mr. Cox: That is a surprise. So you didn't hold your trigger open very long at one time.

Mr. Williams: No, you fired in short bursts.

Mr. Cox: While we are speaking of that, and before we move on, how did you refill those things – did you just exchange tanks, or did you have to fill it up like a...

Mr. Williams: it sort of reminds me when a guy is out in his yard spraying for weeds with a sprayer. Basically it is the same thing, only we used compressed air tanks and you put the fuel in the two fuel tanks on the side. In the middle between those two fuel tanks was a compressed air tank, so you put the fuel in, then you put the compressed air in the compressed air tank. Of course you did that with air generators that gave you air. You would put certain pressure in the air tank so that when you released the air from the tank it would go to the top of the fuel tanks and press the fuel out a hose at the bottom of the tanks. The fuel tanks would hold about 2 ½ gallons each.

Mr. Cox: It is strange – you hear about carrying up ammo to the front line, and bullets of all kinds, hand grenades, but you never hear about them carrying up compressed air. This is quite interesting to me.

Mr. Williams: Once we expelled all the fuel, or the air in the flamethrower in order to get the fuel to burn... If you weren't in the artillery, if you were in the Marines, you never called a rifle a "gun." You didn't do that. A rifle was our "buddy." We slept with it, we ate with it, and we did everything with our rifle. You didn't call that a "gun." In the flamethrower business, we were permitted to call the thing that looked a little like a rifle, we were permitted to call that a gun. It had two triggers on in. It had one that you held in your right hand, which was a fuel release valve. In order to get the air on, you didn't keep that on all of the time, you didn't release your air until you were ready to operate, and it had a handle that you would twist like a water faucet handle and open it up. That would put the air into the tank and it would go "whish" and make all kinds of noise. Then it would come down and the fuel would be released with the trigger. Once you pulled the trigger it would go through about a 24-28 inch pipe to the end of the gun, and on the end of the gun had a metal shield that screwed off. Under that shield they had what was known as a Bakelite phosphorous cylinder. We didn't have plastic back then. We used Bakelite for everything. Hadn't found plastic yet. That cylinder had eight matches in it that were phosphorous matches, and prior to the shield was another trigger that you worked with your left hand. When you pulled the trigger with your left hand, that sent a firing pin forward. It forced one of those phosphorous matches out of that cylinder and it struck like al "old farmer's" match type thing and began burning. So when the fuel came through the pipe in the center it would catch it on fire. That is how you got your fire. You only had eight matches in there. If you used them all up, you had to carry some extra cylinders some place – you usually put them in your pockets. You had to carry some extra cylinders so that if you used up all of your matches you

had a replacement. Once you used the matches and the fuel, and it was all gone, you just roll out of it and leave it rather than to carry it back and have it refilled. We kept a whole group of them filled with fuel and compressed air already in the tank ready to go all the time. That was one of my jobs as an Acting Sergeant.

Mr. Cox: As you advanced to the front, and of course you were right there on the front using your flamethrower, and your tanks run out, do you have like an ammo runner that would bring it up or did you have to go back and get it?

Mr. Williams: Go back and get it. I've said a few times that I probably didn't have many good friends in that Marine group because six times I had to go back and get another flamethrower. I thought surely some of those guys should have brought one up to me, but they didn't.

Mr. Cox: How did you keep track of the matches you used? Was this just something that you...

Mr. Williams: You really didn't keep track. When you did it and it didn't work, you got rid of it.

Mr. Cox: Real quick!

Mr. Williams: And the fuel the same way; once you got rid of your fuel you just got out of it.

Mr. Cox: So you are in the 3rd Marines, and where did you go from Guadalcanal?

Mr. Williams: While we were on Guadalcanal, and began this new training with this new unit, I got promoted from a PFC to a Corporal. They put me in charge of the unit, so we had six people in the unit.

Mr. Cox: They were all flamethrower operators then?

Mr. Williams: Right. They were cross-trained so you could use them either way, and the plan provided that you kept together as a unit until you got to where you were going to go. We went from Guadalcanal to Guam.

The Japanese had taken Guam back from us and killed most of the Americans who were there. We went back to Guam and took it back from them. When we went ashore, it was my job to keep the operators, the demolition people and the flamethrower people, supplied with whatever they needed. I was the "patch" to headquarters company, and it was my job to make sure that the flamethrowers were serviced and ready to go, filled, demolitions were available, etc. We broke the unit up. We would put two – a flamethrower operator and a demolition man – with A, B, and C companies in the battalion, that was their job. If the company commander needed something burned out, or something blown up, he would use those two people. On Guam we used the flamethrower very, very little, and we used very little demolition, so we became riflemen there more than flamethrower or demolition operators. There were no caves to amount to anything on Guam. It was jungle; almost all jungle. Once we got that done, got Guam secured, we continued into our training phase knowing that we were going to go someplace else, but we had no idea where. In early February 1945 we were told that we were shipping out. Nobody in the lower ranks knew where. They put us aboard ship, and after they got us aboard ship, we were there three or four days, and finally they told us that we were headed for Iwo Jima. They brought out a piece of plywood, or whatever we had at that time, showing a makeup of the island. I remember thinking that it looked like a pork chop, and it still looks like a pork chop. That is when they told us that we were going to Iwo Jima. They didn't think we would ever get off the ship because they mentioned there were two other divisions that were going to be the attack divisions. We were in the reserve. We would probably never get off the ship. We would probably be gone about five days, but nobody ever dreamed

	that they would need 60,000-70,000 Marines to take that little piece of ground. They had no intelligence whatsoever to tell them what was there, or how many. I believe that it became quite a surprise to everybody.
Mr. Cox:	At this point in time, exactly what was the outfit you were in? The 21st Marines – would you spell it out?
Mr. Williams:	I was actually in Headquarters Company of the 1st Battalion of the 21st Marine Regiment of the 3rd Marine Division. The companies of the 1st Battalion were A, B, and C Company, and then 2nd Battalion had three companies, and the 3rd Battalion had three companies, so we had three battalions that made up a Regiment. Three battalions made up the 21st Regiment. I had been in C Company prior to getting into this special weapons training, so anybody I knew, was in C Company, so that is where I hung out. Those were my buddies.
Mr. Cox:	So, you are going to Iwo. Once you get there, you didn't go in on the first wave?
Mr. Williams:	That is right.
Mr. Cox:	When did you go in?
Mr. Williams:	We were about five miles out according to history. I have no idea how far we were, but we could see the planes bombing and diving, and we could hear the explosions and see the smoke, etc. that goes with war. We could see that from the deck of the ship. We were just anchored out there. The water at Iwo, at that time, they were having some sort of a storm. The waves were running 15-20 feet – just terrible! Of course for a great big ship it didn't amount to much, but once we got into those little Higgins boats, it was like riding a roller coaster, or a little worse. It would go way up in the front and come down, and then you would get sprayed because it would almost dip under the next wave. The first day most of us got

up on the deck to watch and see what was going on. The airplanes were the most fascinating thing. The big ships around the island firing the 16 inchers, etc., you could actually feel the vibration coming through the air from those things. We were still thinking that we would never get off the ship. During the night of the 19th, that changed. Of course the two divisions – and we are talking about 40,000+ Marines on that little island, all at one time, just were not making any progress. Somebody sent the word that we were going to go in, so the next morning about 0230 hours they get us up, feed us some Navy chow, and I say that with "tongue in cheek," the ships were in total black-out condition. You could not have any lights of any kind; you couldn't strike a match, smoke a cigarette, anything outside. We prepared and got all of our gear on us. At that time I was carrying a pack, a rifle, and all of the paraphernalia (bedroll, etc), that a regular infantry rifleman would carry.

Mr. Cox: Regular combat.

Mr. Williams: Yes, combat. Canteens, first-aid kids, and all that stuff. You had extra socks in your pack and a extra set of skivvies in your pack, etc. I guess it was a 65-70 pound pack that was hanging on you. We had to go over the side of the ship in the dark and down rope ladders to get into the Higgins boats. Those Higgins boats were riding those waves down there. First they are way up here, then suddenly they disappear. I believe, memory-wise, that is my most scared, frightened, moment. When I went over the side of that ship and started down that rope ladder, I knew if I fell off that thing, there wasn't going to be any survival. That is the way I felt about it.

Mr. Cox: You would go right to the bottom, wouldn't you?

Mr. Williams: I was just petrified. I really don't know where the energy came from that got me down that ladder. I finally made it, but one of the ironic things that happened, and there are a lot of them in your

career as a service person, we had two gunnery sergeants. Now, in the Marine Corps, the gunnery sergeant was just about one notch below God. We had two of them because one of them had been in the Corps way back in the peacetime, in the '30's, and he actually had enough points at that time that he could have come home. He wouldn't do it because the Marine Corps was his life; he didn't know anything else. He had never married. The other gunnery sergeant had come in to replace him just before we went to Iwo, and the one wouldn't leave, so we had two of them, which was pretty unusual. At any rate, they are the "big" guys and they are going to show us how to do all of this stuff. You know, they are the ones that are giving us our instructions and they go over the side first. We didn't know this until the next day, but they go over the side first. In the Higgins boats there were four or five sailors there; the guy maneuvering the boat and two or three other guys holding the net to keep it in the boat so that when it went clear down you didn't lose your rope ladder. You know, you kept the rope ladder in the boat. These two fellows started down and the boat went down and the Navy people held on to the ladder. It had been slack and now suddenly it tightened and both of those guys got thrown off. One of them went clear over the Higgins boat into the ocean; the other one went down between the Higgins boat and the big ship. One of the sailors in the boat for the guy that went down between the ships, he was standing right up at the side of the Higgins boat and he grabbed him. He held him until some help brought him back in. The other guy floated back to the rear of the ship. Now it was dark, no light, you can't turn a flashlight on to see where this guy is, but apparently he is yelling. As he goes by the next Higgins Boat they rescued him. It was just amazing. Naturally they didn't to go ashore with us. So finally they came in a couple of days later and joined our

group, and they lived a hard life. They were supposed to be the epitome of a Marine, and here they are can't even get down a rope ladder.

Mr. Cox: Lost a little edge there.

Mr. Williams: Yes. The following day, on the 20th, the island was hit on the 19th – that is when the first group went in. On the 20th, we got up, got on the Higgins boats, went out in preparation to go ashore. You go out there and circle until someone says "go". We circled all day. We just ran around in Higgins boats all day. They would go around in a circle for a while, then they would do figure eights, and then we would go around in circles again. You couldn't go anywhere else. You had to stay in your own little area. Each Higgins boat had a flag on it so they could tell who you were, where you were. We did that all day long. I had never been seasick before, but I, as most of the others got seasick. If you didn't get seasick from the waves, bouncing up and around, you got seasick because somebody else threw up on you. You were jammed in there like sardines; had very little room. We rode that thing until dark that evening; still no room to get ashore. The other Marines on shore just had not secured enough land that they could put another 20,000 guys in there, so we went back aboard ship that night. I can remember getting back aboard ship and just absolutely collapsing on deck. I didn't want anything to eat, I didn't want anything to do with anybody. I was sick as a dog. I just laid there the rest of the night and about 0230 the next morning we were up and did it again. We went back over the side, in the dark, and about noon that day we finally got ashore. The 4th Division went to the left and the 5th to the right and they gave us a little hole in the middle, and we were to be the spearhead division, so we got in.

Mr. Cox: Once you got on shore, what were the weather conditions? Did it

start raining in a day or two?

Mr. Williams: Yes. Raining and cold. Of course, we had been in the Pacific all the time. Normally the rain wasn't too cold. It didn't bother you too much. That far north, however, it was cold. We had what we called a poncho. We wrapped our bedroll into a poncho. The poncho we could wear to keep the rain off. One of the ironic things, strange things, once we got into a position to where we could dig in – dig foxholes and get below ground surface, we would dig down 18-20 inches, or something of that nature, depending on your size. My assistant was 6'6". I could dig a hole and be in it long before he could ever think about it. He had to dig a whole lot more than I did. You would dig your hole, and it was very difficult to dig a hole because the sand was so grainy, like little b-b's, it would just cave in on you. It would just keep rolling in. Eventually you would get enough space that you could get into it. Then, the heat from the ground. There had been a live volcano years before, and the heat from the ground coming up through the ground – if you just laid on the ground with your clothes on – you never took your clothes off of course – with your clothes on the heat was so much that it made a lot of us sick. You were so exhausted that you just practically died. You were almost unconscious and suddenly you would wake up and you were sick because the heat has penetrated your body to the point that it just makes you sick – heat-exhaustion. You would find something – cardboard box, paper, poncho, anything that you could put in the bottom of your hole to keep that heat in the ground rather than on you.

Mr. Cox: Like insulation.

Mr. Williams: Yes. You could dig a hole 14-15 inches deep, put C-ration cans of food in there and the next morning you would have a hot meal.

Mr. Cox: One good thing about it.

Mr. Williams: Yes, one good thing. Once we got up farther north, away from the volcano, that wasn't true. It was just rocky.

Mr. Cox: Well, did this sandy conditions and the rain affect the operation of your equipment, such as your rifle and your flamethrower?

Mr. Williams: Yes. The flamethrower match cylinder became saturated it would affect that. Your match wouldn't fire. Demolition-wise you had to have blasting caps in order to set off an explosion, and you had to keep those dry because if they get damp they would just pop and they wouldn't explode. If they didn't explode, it didn't set the explosive off. So you had to keep those wrapped well, and hidden some place on your body to keep them so they wouldn't draw dampness.

Mr. Cox: Well, speaking of explosives, what type did you use? Did you use dynamite, C-4?

Mr. Williams: C-2 primarily. C-4, of course, was developed some time later than that, but composition C-2 was our primary at that point.

Mr. Cox: Is it kind of a plastic clay-like?

Mr. Williams: Yes. Reminds me of Play dough, putty kind of stuff.

Mr. Cox: Now you spoke of having an assistant, did all flamethrower operator/demolition men have an assistant, and if so, what was his job?

Mr. Williams: Well, your assistant really was your demolition man.

Mr. Cox: OK. So you two worked in tandem.

Mr. Williams: Yes, you worked in tandem. When you needed the flamethrower or you had to take the flamethrower with you with the expectation that you were going to use it, you would carry the flamethrower and he had to carry everything else. He had to carry your weapon...Well, once we got ashore and began to get operating flamethrowers, they issued to us a side-arm, a 45. I couldn't hit the side of a mountain with a 45, so it didn't do me much good. The

first opportunity that I got I found me an M-1 that somebody had discarded. That is what I took. I could do some good with that thing, but I sure couldn't do any good with a 45. So he my our assistant and he carried the extra stuff. He carried satchels of demolition. We had what we called satchel charges that had eight blocks of Composition C-2 in each satchel, and we always carried one or two on each shoulder. They were just like school satchels that we used to carry to school with us. They had a strap on them, and he had to carry some of those also.

Mr. Cox: What if a sniper hit this? Not the carrier, but hit your C-2. Would anything happen?

Mr. Williams: No, it would not. You could shoot through C-2; much different than dynamite. If you hit dynamite with a bullet, you're gone. With this stuff you could shoot it and it would not explode.

Mr. Cox: That leads me to another question. You are wearing a tank with all of your liquids in it, what happened if your tanks were hit with it?

Mr. Williams: I have heard, never did witness, but I have heard that the fuel tanks could be penetrated. The air compressed tank was a real heavy metal and I never heard of one of those being penetrated by a bullet. If I may jump ahead just a moment because it was one of those scary moments that I remember of February 23, 1945. Much of what happened that four hour period that I was working, doing the job that I had been trained for, I don't remember. There are so many, many things that others told me about, even that they wrote about in my citation that I have no memory of those things at all.

Mr. Cox: I'll interrupt here just a minute—what you are referring to is February 23rd , the day you did the actions that resulted in you being awarded the Medal of Honor.

Mr. Williams: That is correct. Ironically, it was the same day that the flag went up on Mount Suribachi, but I had absolutely nothing to do with that. I

was about 1,000 yards up the beach.

Mr. Cox: You had your hands full.

Mr. Williams: Yes, I had my hands full. When you were attacking, you didn't walk upright with a flamethrower on your back. I can guarantee you when you were being shot at you got down and tried to find anything you could get under, or behind, etc., but I was crawling up this ditch trying to get to one of the pillboxes — I have no idea which one of the seven that I was working on. That doesn't come back. The thing that comes back is as I was crawling up that ditch, there was what we called and what the Japanese called a Nambu. It was a light machine gun. It fired about 750 rounds a minute. It was a terrible sounding thing.

Mr. Cox: Would you recognize the sound if you heard one today?

Mr. Williams: I believe I would. Yes, I believe I would. He was firing at me, and apparently he was firing out of a pillbox that had aperture in it and he could only lower the machine gun so far. It was on a gun pod. As he was firing, and I'm crawling toward the pillbox, the bullets from the Nambu are ricocheting off of my tanks. I can really feel that. It is like a jackhammer. They would ricochet off and make a sound when they went away – zing! But fortunately they all went up instead of down, or I wouldn't be here talking to you today. I remember that very vividly because of the shaking and the vibration that I was receiving and the ricocheting noise. He couldn't get it down far enough to get into my body and I kept going. Then he couldn't get me at all because he could only get down so far. His field of fire was restricted.

Mr. Cox: Did you get him?

Mr. Williams: I got him. I don't know whether I was mad at him or not, but I got him.

Mr. Cox: I guess when you are in real heavy action like that you are totally

focused on...

Mr. Williams: Absolutely. Yes. The world could blow up around you and it just wouldn't penetrate.

Mr. Cox: When you went after these pillboxes, were you told by your Captain in charge that this is what you had to do, or you just knew what you had to do?

Mr. Williams: You knew what you had to do. We had been attempting to penetrate a line of defense. There were supposedly 700 pillboxes in this protected area. I didn't count them, but we had been trying to get through that particular area for some time and we were losing an awful lot of Marines. Having been in charge of a six-person unit, at that point in time, on February 23rd, I had already lost those fellows with the other companies. They had either been killed or wounded. My assistant, Vernon Waters, and I are the only ones left.

Mr. Cox: You two were the survivors.

Mr. Williams: Vernon was with another company, so when the Commanding Officer would call for meeting, an NCO meeting, I would get called to that same meeting because supposedly I had a unit. I didn't, but I had had one. I would get to go and sit in on the strategy meetings. Captain Beck from Mississippi was our Commanding Officer. He would call the meeting and we all went to a shell hole, a crater hole, got down in there and that is where we had our meeting. He was very frustrated because he had lost a lot of his Marines that day. I can't truthfully say what I said, I can only say what others say I said. Apparently he said to me, "Do you think that you can do anything with the flamethrower or demolition?" Somebody, one of the other Marines, said that I said, "Well, I will try." What are you going to do? I don't remember what I said, I remember the occasion, and I remember saying, "I want some protection. Give me two BAR

people, and two M-1 rifle people." So he gave me those. One of those I selected as my pole charge man. We would take a pole charge with us, so after we burned out a pillbox (a pillbox is a bunker), or if there were caves, and I didn't work the caves that day, then you would use the pole charge to stick in the pillbox or down the face of the cave and blow it up. So, you had the pole charge man with you. A pole charge is a stick/piece of lumber, anything you can get , put a flat piece of wood and nail it to one end of it, and on that flat piece of wood (which was usually 12 x 12, or 12 x 14 piece of flat wood) you would fasten your demolitions to that. You would just wrap it and tie it under any way that you could so that when you took the pole and shoved it in the hole or shoved it in the pillbox, you would be eight or ten feet from it and you have a fuse that runs from the explosion on the end of the pole back so you pull the fuse lighter and it sets off the explosion. He carried that; that was his job to take that thing.

Mr. Cox: (Blank area on tape - Side #2)

Mr. Williams: When I wear my medal, and I only wear it on special occasions. It is not something that I wear just to be wearing. There has to be a reason behind it. I lost two of those guys that day, and they gave their life, in a sense, to protect mine.

Mr. Cox: Yes.

Mr. Williams: So when I wear the medal, and any time that I'm speaking, or have the opportunity, I say that the medal doesn't belong to me. It belongs to them. I just happen to be the guy they awarded it to, but they made it possible. It is their medal; I just wear it.

Mr. Cox: You can't give any more than they gave for their country.

Mr. Williams: That's right. You can't do it. So, it is their medal – I'm just the caretaker of it. That is why in the book they are signing around here, the Medal of Honor Book that they are signing, that is why the

title on my page is "Caretaker." I'm just a caretaker of this medal for them.

Mr. Cox: To get back to your taking on these pillboxes, one question arose while you were talking about it. What were these pillboxes constructed of?

Mr. Williams: They were reinforced concrete steel pillboxes, and the walls on them were something near two feet thick, as well as the ceiling. The Japanese Commanding General, after he got to Iwo, apparently they knew that was going to be a target sometime because their fighter planes flying off that island, shooting down our B-29's, they had to go. So it was just a matter of time, and apparently he knew that. He had been in the United States. He had been to school in the United States. He was a pretty wise guy, so he ordered in a lot of steel stuff and concrete to make these pillboxes. You could drop bombs on them all day long. Of course we bombed that place for 70 days before we ever got there. The last three days it was almost a 24-hour a day bombardment. That didn't affect them whatsoever. We couldn't blow the pillboxes up because they were so strongly built. Most of them had been buried into the sand so that there was a lot of sand on top of it. About the only part that you could see was the front where the aperture was and that was their field of fire.

Mr. Cox: Did they have a lot of cross-fire?

Mr. Williams: Yes, they built them in a way that they were what they called "self-protecting pillboxes." You couldn't get to one without another one being able to see you. So they protected themselves. They had holes, tunnels, dug in most of them so that if you got too close, or they saw that you were going to get to them, they would go down the hole, through the tunnel (they had 16 miles of tunnel in that place), and then they would just go to another pillbox. I have

said on a number of occasions it was almost like fighting ghosts because all of a sudden you are in a firefight, Marines are being killed, you know that you are killing the enemy, but then when you try to find them they don't exist – there are none there. What they were doing, of course, was pulling them back into those caves. They would pop up out of one hole and give you a terrific firefight, and then they would disappear. They would go to another and come out of another hole somewhere.

Mr. Cox: Frustrating!

Mr. Williams: Oh, very frustrating! You never knew where they were. As I said, it was just like fighting ghosts. You saw them, and then you didn't see them.

Mr. Cox: The only way you could take out the pillbox is basically, if I understand you correctly, one by one.

Mr. Williams: That is exactly right.

Mr. Cox: On an individual basis.

Mr. Williams: That's right. That day I knocked out seven. Don't ask me how I did it, I have no idea. I know I used six flamethrowers. I have no idea how many demolition charges we used, but by getting rid of seven in this pod, that enabled an opening and we then began to file through that opening – just a few at a time going through. Once you got behind them, you pretty "had" them because they had no field of fire back there. That is why I was credited with what I did. The thing that I am so proud of, I am certainly a proud possessor of the Medal of Honor. No question about that. But one of the other things that I am so proud of is that the citation that accompanied the Medal of Honor does not have one word from me in it. It contains the words of other Marines who witnessed what took place, and there have been thousands of times, thousands of occasions, I saw some myself, where enlisted people did extraordinary things that

were far above the line of duty, but there was no officer present to witness it or make the recommendation, or elected not to make the recommendation. It goes back to Biblical times, you must have at least two witnesses as to what took place. So even though you might have somebody who recommends it, if there is nobody surviving to make a witness, you don't go anywhere. That is required. What is said in my citation are the words of my fellow Marines. I am very proud of that, and I never knew what they said. Nobody ever told me. Some years ago, probably ten or twelve years ago, I was thinking about that one day, one night, and I wondered what those guys said. So I wrote a letter to the Commandant of the Marine Corps. I told him I was establishing a memorabilia and I wanted a copy of what those other Marines said that eventually resulted in my receiving the Medal of Honor. I didn't even know what Captain Beck said. I really didn't have a whole lot of hope of getting those – I really didn't. Had a good friend who has a small museum, and I promised that if I ever got this information I would give it to him. I really had very little hope that I would get it. Time went on — about three months and didn't even get an acknowledgment saying they got my letter and would think about it. One day this great big package arrived, great big manila envelope, from the Marine Corps. I wondered what that was. I had almost forgotten I had asked for it. I opened it and there are the originals of the statements that those Marines made. I'm sure the Marine Corps kept copies. I have those, and I am very proud.

Mr. Cox: Oh, certainly. It is wonderful what your fellow Marines thought that what you did that day was...

Mr. Williams: Worthy.

Mr. Cox: Yes. This could go on and on...

Mr. Williams: Oh, we could go on longer.

Mr. Cox: I know you have a time factor, and I hate to wrap it up believe me. But once you completed this particular action, did you keep moving forward?

Mr. Williams: Yes.

Mr. Cox: What was your objective? Looking at the maps, was it airfield #2?

Mr. Williams: The ultimate objective was to get to the other end of the island, the other side of the island.

Mr. Cox: Going the opposite way of Mount Suribachi?

Mr. Williams: Yes, going north. We were the Spearhead Division, so we were to break them apart, if you will and get to the beach. That was the ultimate objective. The #1 airfield was the only one that was really completed, or that they used, and the others were just in the form of being built, so we ended up at the far side of the island.

Mr. Cox: Looking at a map, Woody is pointing out a point called Kitano Point. That was your objective?

Mr. Williams: That was the ultimate objective – to get to there.

Mr. Cox: Looking at this map, is there anyway you can tell approximately where the action went on that resulted in you....

Mr. Williams: Yes, right at the end of the first airfield. This map shows Sulphur Mine. Now I never did see that thing. If it was there, it was blown all to pieces, but that is basically where it was.

Mr. Cox: Right in this area right here.

Mr. Williams: Yes. They had built those pillboxes around the end of that airfield, apparently to protect it. That is basically where it was.

Mr. Cox: Well, you kept driving, and of course as you said, you ended up here at Kitano Point. After you finally made it there, then what transpired?

Mr. Williams: Once we got there, and the other divisions continued their advancement, the island was secure. They did that on March 26th.

Mr. Cox: It took over a month.

Mr. Williams: Yes. The campaign lasted 36 days. I lasted 35 of those 36 because we didn't get there the first day. Very few Marines lasted the total 36 days because of a number of wounds, etc.

Mr. Cox: High casualty rate. What was that casualty rate?

Mr. Williams: We lost 6,800 killed, and about 21,000 wounded.

Mr. Cox: So, once the campaign was over, when did you learn that you had been recommended for the most prestigious medal that your country can bestow?

Mr. Williams: Let me preface my answer with this: There were 27 Medals of Honor awarded as a result of Iwo Jima. Thirteen of us survived, so better than 50% died in the process of earning their Medal. I had never heard of the Medal of Honor. Never knew anything existed like that. We came back to Guam in April after Iwo Jima, and people were coming around from division/regiments asking questions. They came and asked me a few questions. They were also asking other guys questions too. They sort of fooled us. They said they were doing a history of Iwo Jima. That is what I thought was going on. We had a fellow from a little place called Salem, West Virginia, which was probably 50 miles from where I lived. I didn't know him, but he worked in Regiment, and he was a clerk-typist. He had been given the assignment of typing some of this material. So one day he came to the Company where I was and looked me up. He told me he was from Salem, and we had a "West Virginia chat." He said, "You are being recommended for a medal." I said, "What kind of a medal?" He said, "I don't know. I just typed up some facts, but you are going to be recommended for a medal." I had been wounded and I really associated that it was going to be a Purple Heart. I had heard of the Purple Heart.

Mr. Cox: Were you wounded on Iwo?

Mr. Williams: Yes.

Mr. Cox: What day of the progression?

Mr. Williams: March 6th. I got hit in the leg. I was absolutely behaving myself, sitting in a foxhole. I never knew whether it was our artillery, or the enemy's.

Mr. Cox: Probably shrapnel got you.

Mr. Williams: Yes, shrapnel got me. Let me mention very quickly. We hit the beach with about 276 or 278 Marines in our Company, "C" Company, and that was on the 21st of February. On March 6th we were down to 17. That day we received Marines from the States, shipped directly from the States, that had never had training in weapons, flamethrowers, machine guns, mortars, etc. They had fired on the rifle range. They knew how to fire a BAR and a rifle, but never any infantry training, so they didn't know how to maneuver or do things to protect themselves. We got a big replacement that night. I don't remember how many people were there, but they brought them in. We spent that whole night in the dark. We were still in "black out." We tried to teach those fellows how to operate a flamethrower, how to handle a pole charge, how to handle a machine gun. You could put up a poncho. You would get under the poncho and then you could have a light because you wouldn't be seen from anywhere. So they used that method so you could see something – see the parts of whatever you were doing. We were called to go into battle the very next morning. So we did, and we lost an awful lot of those Marines that next morning because they just didn't' know. That was a fatal day. That isn't a proper term. That was a day of fate for me. My big assistant, a fellow by the name of Vernon Waters from Floyd, Montana, wheat country. It is like my hometown – if you batted your eyes you would never even know it was there. But that is where he was from. He was a

big Swed and his family were all wheat farmers. That day we were rifle people. We didn't have a flamethrower. There was no particular call for it at that moment. We didn't have a cave, a pillbox; we were just trying to get through – move forward. For whatever reason, when I jumped in that hole – they were dropping some mortars in on us – I jumped in that hole and it wasn't very deep, I couldn't get my whole body in it and had to have my knees sticking up. Well, my knees are better than my head, so I got my head down and my knees up. Well, that is how the shrapnel got me. The shrapnel came through and hit my knee. Well, Vernon was right in front of me, perhaps 25-30 yards, and he is down on the deck ready to move out, and just as he gets up, gets on his feet, the Japanese dropped what they called a "knee mortar." You didn't fire it from the knee I'll guarantee you. Some guys tried it and got a broken leg, but you didn't do that. Anyway, a knee mortar came in and hit him smack dab on top of his helmet - dead center. It killed him. I lost my buddy.

Mr. Cox: Let me ask you, at this point, when that happens do you give much thought to it, or because of the action around you, it just passes through your mind real quickly?

Mr. Williams: I did. I can't speak for anybody else. There are times when you didn't even have time to realize that the guy had been killed. There were those times too. But with Vernon, he and I had been together since Guadalcanal. We were closer than brothers. Absolutely. If he breathed I had to breath too. Vernon and I, contrary to the Marine Corps rules and regulations – when I went into the Marine Corps, my wife-to-be, the lady I was engaged to, who has now been my wife for 59 years, she gave me a ruby ring because her first name is Ruby and she said, "Every time you look at that you think of me."

It was a 10 cent ring because it turned my finger green all the time, but I kept it. Vernon had in his family a gene that caused the two fingers in the middle to always grow together. All of his brothers were that way, his Dad was that way, maybe his Grandparents too. I don't know. But anyway, those two fingers were growing together on both hands. The Marine Corps wanted to separate them, and he wouldn't let them. That was family stuff and he wasn't going to do it. It didn't affect his trigger finger, so he wouldn't do it. He had a big ring that his Dad had given him, and he wore on his index finger since he couldn't get it on his ring finger. Somewhere in the process of our living together, he said, "If anything ever happens to me you get that ring off my finger and get it back to my Dad." I said, "I'll do that if you will take the ring off my finger and give it back to my Ruby." OK, we made that pact. Regardless of what happens, do it. But when he got killed that day, and I ran to him, the first thing I saw – really – more so than the damage that had been done to him, was that ring. I recalled our pact. I pulled that ring off. We had been in the Pacific for months and months. We were very brown, and when I pulled that ring off there was a great bit white spot there. It is a courts martial offense to take anything off of a Marine body. I knew that. We had been told that over and over. You don't ever do that. Well, I did it because of our pact. I knew they were going to see that. There was still black, volcanic ash where we were, so I grabbed a hand of it, spit in it two or three times to get some wet to it, and then I rubbed it all over that finger. It didn't completely camouflage it, but it dulled the brightness of it anyway. Apparently enough that nobody ever asked any questions. I kept the ring, put it in my pocket, carried it with me all the rest of the time I was overseas. When I got back home I had written to the Mother and Father, and I told

	them I had the ring and I was going to personally deliver it. I got out in November 1945. In January 1946 I delivered that to his Mother and Father.
Mr. Cox:	I bet that was quite an emotional time.
Mr. Williams:	Yes.
Mr. Cox:	Well, I want to tell you how much I appreciate it, and it is an honor.
Mr. Williams:	Thank you very much Floyd.
Mr. Cox:	I appreciate what you did for me as an American, and it is great to meet a man that won the highest award that our country can give.
Mr. Williams:	We use that term sometimes, and we try to get away from it. They used to introduce us each time – the holder, or whatever, winner of the Congressional Medal of Honor. Because of other things that have happened, when they established the Congressional Medal of Freedom, and the Congressional Medal of something else, our Medal of Honor Society decided we would drop the "Congressional" and try to encourage people to do that so there won't be that confusion. I have been introduced as having the Gold Medal.
Mr. Cox:	Real historian.
Mr. Williams:	I did not go there to "win" anything; it was a war, but I am so proud to have been, and we like to use the term "the recipient of the Medal of Honor" because we didn't win it – others helped us.
Mr. Cox:	Your friend.
Mr. Williams:	That's right.
Mr. Cox:	That died at an early age.
Mr. Williams:	I wouldn't have had it, had it not been for those other Marines.
Mr. Cox:	Thank you very much.
Mr. Williams:	You are welcome.

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