

A DAY OF INFAMY – A LIFE CUT SHORT ENSIGN LAWRENCE WILLIAMS, USS *ARIZONA*

by Garrick P. Boyd



It is easy for us, as collectors, to become fixated on the objects that cross our paths. We care about condition, rarity, desirability and, let's be honest, the price. We are, of course, cognizant and appreciative of the history connected to them, but so often we bandy about the phrase: "If only this thing could talk." Yes, it's a cliché, but an apt one. Every so often, however, we are presented with something that does have a voice. Something that can tell its story to us from across the wide gulf of time. Such is the case here.

This presentation covers an extensive lot of items and documents that spans the short military career of Ensign Lawrence Williams, U.S. Navy: from his application to naval aviator school; his flight training; his first and only shipboard billet aboard the ill-fated USS *Arizona* and the aftermath of his death during the Japanese attack on December 7, 1941. The two most important items were recovered by Navy divers from William's cabin aboard the ship during the recovery efforts following the attack: Williams' gold naval aviator wings (Figure 1); and a U.S.N. wallet containing his aviator certification cards (Figure 2), both of which were forwarded to his mother some months after the attack along with a

letter from the acting commander, USS *Arizona* that explains that they were recovered from the ship (Figure 3). The wings were made by Hilborn-Hamburger, and have moderate surface damage on the front, as well as some deformation at the mounts for the pin back. The aviator certification cards, signed by Adm. Chester Nimitz (then Chief of the Navy's Bureau of Navigation), were still housed in their embossed, black leather wallet that exhibited extensive water damage, although both of the enclosed cards were still clear and legible; protected by their clear celluloid cover.

Our company acquired this group of artifacts in 2015. We were understandably excited to come into possession of personal effects actually recovered from the wreck of the USS *Arizona*, but once we began investigating the extensive documents and other items that accompanied them, we discovered the poignant stories they had to tell. First and foremost, the military career of a patriotic young man who was killed in the service of his country. Second, the devotion of a grieving mother to the memory of her dead son. Finally, there is an ancillary tale of unlikely survival during one of the darkest days in American history.



Figure 1. Ensign Lawrence Williams gold naval aviator wings recovered from the wreckage of the USS *Arizona*.

Lawrence A. Williams was born on June 3, 1914, to Lawrence W. and Ruth Williams of Oxford Township, Ohio. Not much is known about his early years, but Williams was evidently a smart and industrious fellow; graduating from the Miami University School of Architecture with a Bachelors Degree in architecture in 1936. He began his architectural career as an apprentice soon afterward, while also working for a local hardware store as an electrician (his pre-military career was handwritten by Williams in a letter he wrote to accompany his application for naval flight training). He was initially enlisted as a Seaman, 2nd Class, United States Naval Reserve in May of 1940, and was subsequently discharged in October in order to report to Naval Air Station Pensacola as a Naval Aviation Cadet. He successfully completed his training, graduating 42nd in his class, and was commissioned an Ensign on April 21, 1941 (Figure 4). He was assigned to Observation Squadron 1 (VO-1) and billeted aboard the USS *Arizona* (BB-39), flying a Vought OS2U “Kingfisher” floatplane (reg. no. 1-O-3), and reported to the ship on June 17, 1941.

Williams’ fitness reports tell of the difficulty he had making the transition to shipboard life, and the transcribed letters to his fiancé in Ohio bear that out. He complains of the lack of privacy, lack of time and the noise caused by the floatplane catapults sometimes driving him to distraction. Nevertheless, by December his reports showed improvement, and it seemed to the evaluator that he had the makings of a good officer. We are fortunate to have an official photographic record of Williams at the controls of his aircraft (Figure 5). On September 6, 1941, the USS *Arizona* was steaming off Hawaii conducting floatplane launch and recovery drills with a Navy photographer aboard who took two photographs of Williams’ aircraft as his back-seater, Radioman 3rd Class G.H. Lane, worked to attach the plane to the ship’s recovery crane. Williams’ face is plainly visible, and is looking almost directly at the camera in one of them. Just three months later he, along with 1,176 of his shipmates, would be dead.

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor commenced at about 7:55 in the morning of December 7. Within the first ten minutes, Nakajima B5N2 “Kate” torpedo bombers from the carriers Kaga and Hiryu attacked the USS *Arizona* from an altitude of just under 10,000 feet using 16-inch, 1,760 lb. armor-piercing naval shells that had been modified into air-dropped bombs. Four hits were made, with the fourth and final bomb impacting near turret II at around 8:06. This bomb likely penetrated the forward powder magazine before detonating and caused a catastrophic explosion that completely destroyed the forward portion of the ship. We do not know how Williams met his end, his body was never found and was officially listed by the Navy as “not recoverable.”

It is here that the focus of the story shifts to Lawrence’s mother, Ruth. The bulk of the artifacts in the grouping are letters and documents addressed to her. Some are shipping receipts and Naval administrative forms pertaining to the personal items returned to her, as well as financial documents concerning the survivor ben-

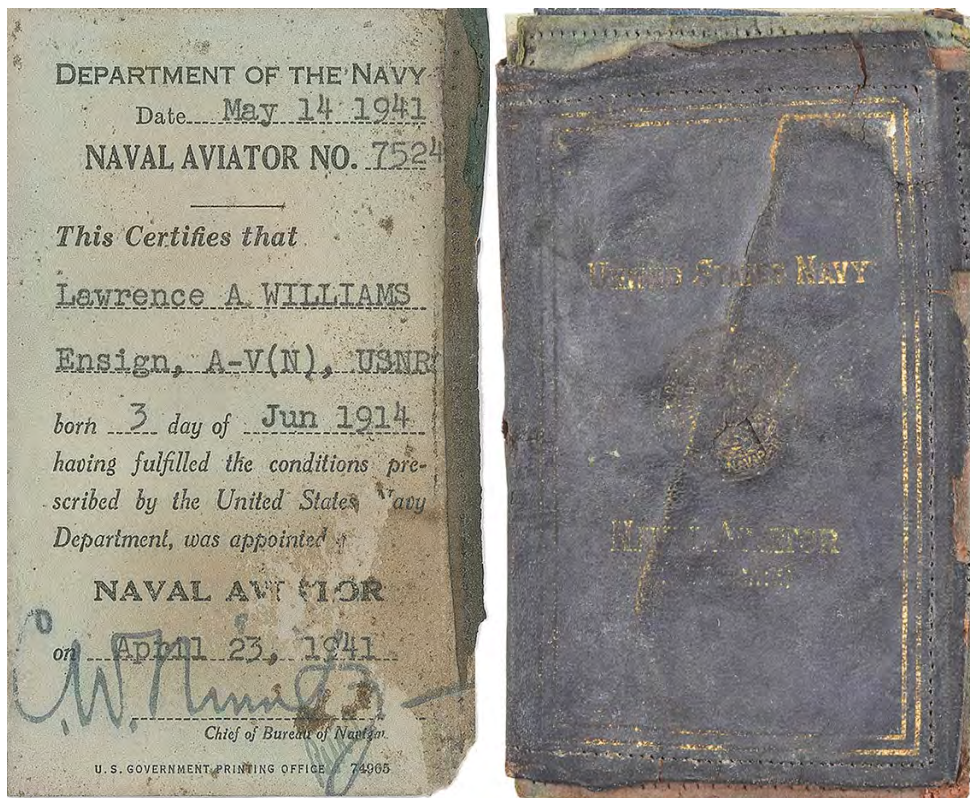


Figure 2. U.S. Navy wallet of Ensign Lawrence Williams recovered from the wreckage of the USS *Arizona* containing his aviator certification cards.

ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE
U.S.S. ARIZONA

Pearl Harbor, T.H.,
March 9, 1942.

Ruth B. Williams,
304 W. Church St.,
Oxford, Ohio.

Dear Mrs. Williams:

Your letter of January 20, 1942 to the Bureau of Navigation, Washington, D.C. has been forwarded to me for reply.

From available information your son was on board ship at the time of his death and not in the plane. It is regretted that information as to exactly how he met death on board is not known as his body has not been recovered or among the identified dead. It is believed that he met death due to strafing by machine gun fire but there is nothing to substantiate this.

I regret that there is no other available information to furnish you. Please accept the deepest sympathy of the officers and crew survivors of the U.S.S. ARIZONA.

Very truly yours,

A. J. Homann
A. J. HOMANN,
Commanding.

Ps: This date \$391 in cash was recovered from your son's room which will be forwarded along with several other effects recovered by U.S.S. ARIZONA salvage party.

Figure 3. Letter from the acting commander, USS *Arizona* to the mother of Ensign Lawrence Williams noting that his remains were not found and explaining his personal items that they were recovered from the ship.



Figure 4. Picture of Ensign Lawrence Williams with family and in uniform.



Figure 5. Pictures taken during floatplane launch and recovery drills by the USS *Arizona* September 6, 1941 of Williams' aircraft as his back-seater, Radioman 3rd Class G.H. Lane, worked to attach the plane to the ship's recovery crane.

efits and pension of a serviceman killed in action. A Presidential Memorial Certificate, still in its original shipping tube with White House return address, and her son's posthumous Purple Heart medal are also included (Figure 6). The rest of the documents, however, were responses to a stream of letters that she wrote to various officials in the Navy, at the War Department, even the American Red Cross, fruitlessly asking for any information about how her son died, and about the disposition of his body. Reading them, it is impossible not to feel great sympathy for Mrs. Williams. She wanted to bury her son, but it was not to be. We can only imagine her true feelings, but we can get some idea by looking at the Purple

Heart medal that was sent to her. This was a posthumous award, and yet, it is heavily worn. The suspension ribbon is frayed, and much of the gilt finish has been worn off of the medal itself, with most of the wear occurring on the reverse, where Lawrence's name is engraved. It does not require a great feat of deduction to realize why this is so. Without a body to bury, without a grave nearby, this medal became a talisman for her. It was an object onto which she could project her grief, and over time, she rubbed the gold finish off of her son's name. The American Legion Gold Star Certificate sent to his mother is shown in Figure 7.

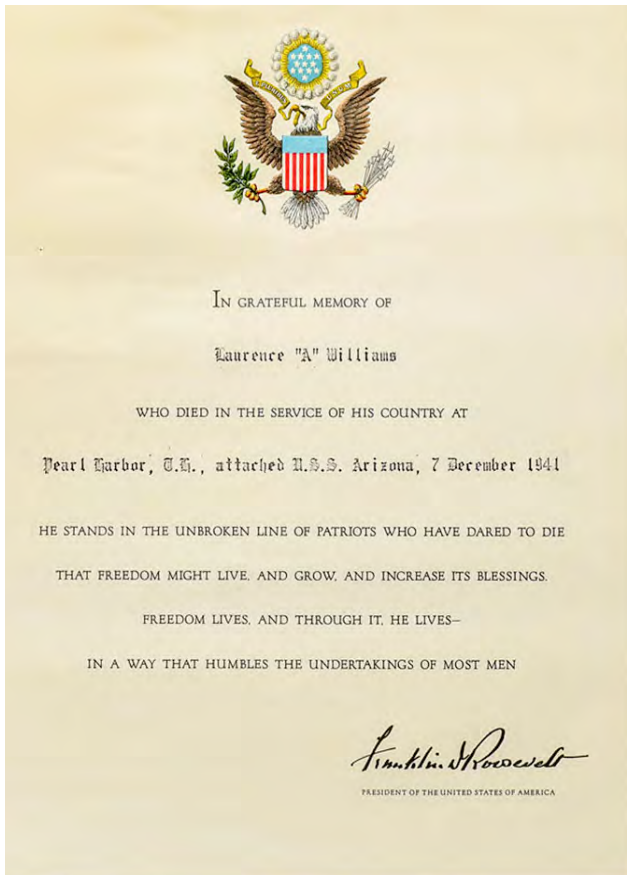
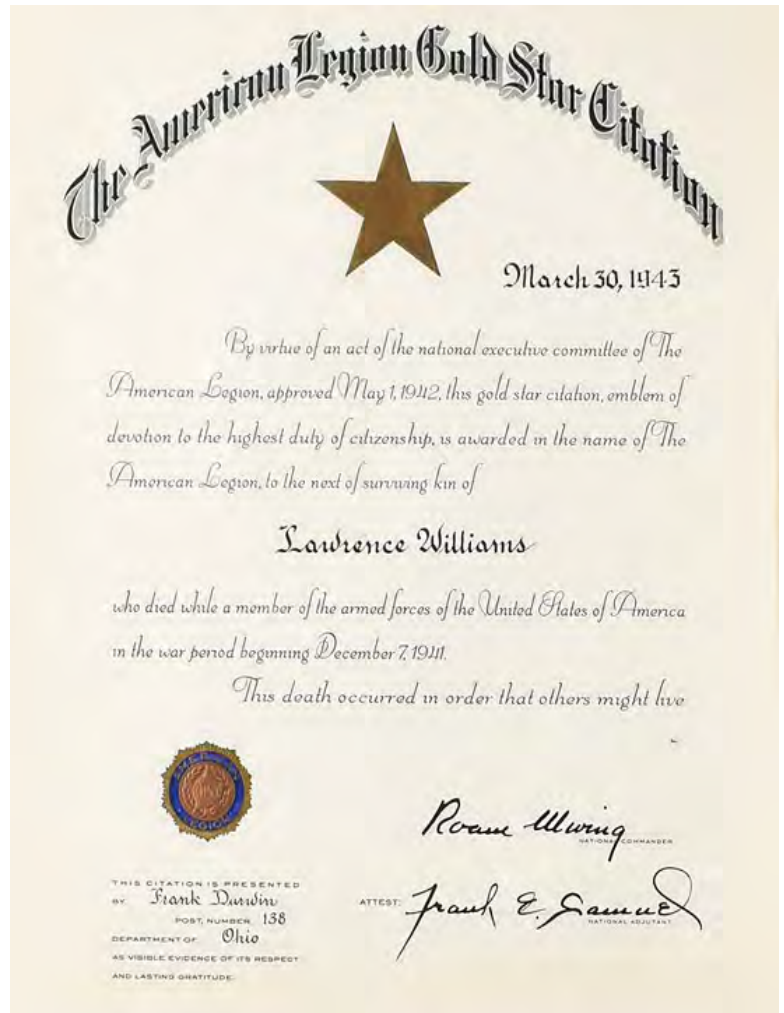


Figure 6. Presidential Memorial Certificate, and Ensign Lawrence Williams posthumous Purple Heart medal sent to his mother.



Figure 7. Gold Star Citation sent to Ensign Lawrence Williams' mother.



Now we turn to the third tale. One that was only recently discovered after reading an online interview shortly before preparing this presentation. To tell it we need to go back to those floatplane recovery photos from September, 1941. Williams' crewman was listed in the caption as "Radioman 3rd Class G.H. Lane." His full name was Glenn Harvey Lane, and he survived not only the attack, but also the entire war. He was born in Iowa on January 29, 1918, enlisting in the U.S. Navy in February of 1940, and became, as we know, a radio operator on *Arizona's* embarked scout aircraft unit. On the morning of the attack, he was on deck making his way to his battle station when the magazine explosion threw him into the oily water next to the ship. He decided to swim for the *USS Nevada*, which was next in line to the stern. He managed to get aboard as she cast off and began maneuvering, then joined in damage and fire control operations after she was repeatedly hit trying to leave

the harbor. Eventually suffering too much damage, and down by the bows, the *USS Nevada* grounded herself off of Hospital Point so as not to block the main navigation channel, and Lane was sent to recuperate aboard the hospital ship *USS Solace*. In his interview, Lane joked, "As far as I know, I am the only sailor in the U.S. Navy that had two battleships shot out from under him in less than an hour." Following his return to active service, Lane transferred to an SBD squadron aboard *USS Yorktown* and took part in the battles of Coral Sea and Midway. He served in the Navy for a total of 30 years and retired as a Command Master Chief Petty Officer in 1969. Sadly, Glenn Lane passed away in December of 2011, and he was reunited with Ensign Williams, as well as the rest of his old shipmates, when his ashes were interred aboard the *Arizona* shortly thereafter.

