

Leadership, loyalty and perseverance

Veteran says Ilwaco High School has 'a tradition of serving'

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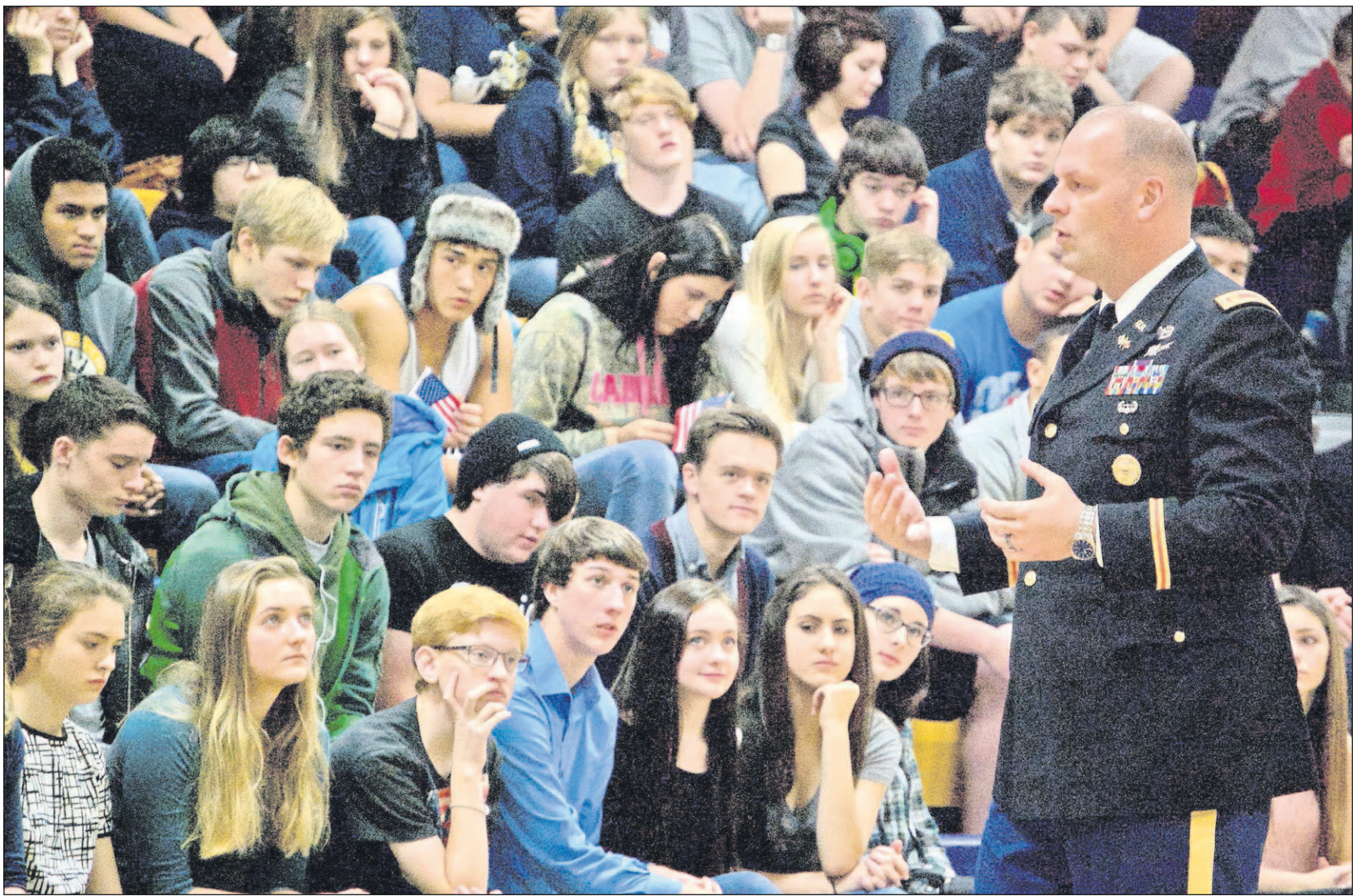
ILWACO, Wash. — George Williams asked the student to repeat her question — his hearing has been bad since the explosion.

The student spoke louder, "What was the scariest moment for you?"

The Ilwaco High School gym was quiet as the teenagers waited for the soldier's response.

"I could say it was when I got blown up, but I can't really remember that," Williams said. The scariest moment was when an officer handed him a clip of ammo in a base in Kuwait.

"That's when I realized, there may be some people outside those walls who don't want me there," Williams said.



Katheryn Houghton/EO Media Group

George Williams, an Ilwaco High School alum, tells students of his experiences fighting the war in Iraq.

Finding a purpose

Earlier this month, Williams spoke at the Ilwaco High School veterans' assembly about his life since he left the peninsula in 1995 to join the military.

"I want to tell you my story, not to scare you, but show you that despite anything that happens you can overcome adversity," he told the students.

Williams, who went by "Lonnie" in school, was Ilwaco High's 1987 class president. The school's cafeteria was his ballroom for school dances. He spent muddy nights on the football field and Saturday mornings on the track. His mom was a teacher and his dad was a coach.

After high school, Williams studied education at Eastern Washington University. By 1995, he was teaching summer English classes at the Naselle Youth Camp, but consistent work was hard to find. One night he went back to his Long Beach home and turned on the TV. Soldiers and "Be all you can be" formed in front of a flag flashed on his screen.

"I wanted a purpose, and that seemed like a good one to have," Williams said in a later interview.

Mosul bombing

In 2004 Iraq was chaos, Williams said. Buildings were crumbling. Residents were nervous and soldiers were fighting an unseen enemy.



Katheryn Houghton/EO Media Group

George Williams, a major with the Washington National Guard's 81st Stryker Brigade Combat Team, spoke to Ilwaco High School students last week.

Along with 4,000 other soldiers in the 1st Brigade 25th Infantry Division, Williams' mission was to train and support the Iraqi army and find insurgents.

Williams was six days away from a home visit when a suicide bomber entered his base's mess hall.

"Three of us always ate lunch together," he said. "On that day, one friend was 40 miles north on a mission. My other friend, she sat across from me. She was in my shadow as it happened."

She watched a man 20 feet behind Williams stand up and pull something off his vest.

Then she watched the man explode.

The bomb killed 22 people. It was the deadliest single attack since the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003.

Williams was knocked out for five minutes. He felt himself spin back into reality as he heard his name being

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yelled. The spinning stopped when he opened his eyes and saw his friend leaning over him. Then he felt the pain.

There's a photo that was widely used by media outlets of a man being carried out of the hall on a stretcher. A hole in the roof illuminates the hall as soldiers carry soldiers to medics.

In the background, five people lean over Williams. His shirt is ripped, showing a tattoo of the sun. The photo was how his wife learned Williams was in the bombing.

Williams spent a month in a hospital, had 12 surgeries and took six months of physical therapy. Today, his sun is surrounded by a sleeve of tattoos that covers two plates and 22 screws in his arm. He also has four pieces of shrapnel lodged in his body.

Williams said people ask him if he has Post Traumatic Stress Disorder — he said if he does, he manages it well.

Training grounds

Williams sat in the bleachers with students as they watched a slideshow of Ilwaco alumni who served in the military. The room erupted in applause when Williams' name and photo appeared.

"Ilwaco has a tradition of serving," Williams told the students, listing a classmate who became a crew chief on Air Force One and another peer who served as a Marine in Operation Desert Storm. He currently serves as a major with the Washington National Guard's 81st Stryker Brigade Combat Team.

He said leadership, loyalty and perseverance were traits he sharpened in the service but learned in his high school halls.

"Every time you train on the football field, or prepare for a debate," he said. "That's real training for whatever thing you choose."



9-1-WHAT?

THE BEST OF THE WORST CALLS TO ASTORIA 911 DISPATCH

Going soft serve

Warrenton used to have a reputation as a rough-and-tumble kind of town. There are a few places — we won't mention any names, but you know — that are still a little salty in between the big-box stores.

But a rumble at the Dairy Queen? Seriously? Did they run out of Dilly Bars or something?

We can do better.

Follow reporter Kyle Spurr on his 9-1-What? Twitter watch, where a few of the sometimes head-scratching calls to area dispatch take center stage. The full feed is at www.twitter.com/9_1_WHAT.

9-1-WHAT? [Following](#)

{11/13 @ 7:14 a.m.} Man sleeping on the steps of a pool on a mattress at Motel 6. #Astoria

RETWEET 1

9-1-WHAT? [Following](#)

{11/13 @ 11:37 a.m.} Report of a man urinating on a playground. #Astoria

RETWEET 1

9-1-WHAT? [Following](#)

{11/17 @ 9:11 a.m.} A grade-school student was taking pictures in the bathroom. #Warrenton

RETWEET 1

9-1-WHAT? [Following](#)

{11/14 @ 6:26 p.m.} Physical fight between four or five men and women at Dairy Queen. #Warrenton

RETWEET 7

9-1-WHAT? [Following](#)

{11/17 @ 8:51 p.m.} Woman reports seeing a man in a ski mask at her front door. While on the phone, she decided she did not see it. #Astoria

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NOVEMBER 27 Help us help others with your canned food donation

1 Can = 1 Ride

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Need to get an early start? No problem! We start at 6am... you won't miss a thing!

For more information or alternative formats contact us at 503-861-7433 • <http://www.ridethebus.org/>

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