

Doss, Desmond Thomas (1919–2006)

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Desmond Thomas Doss is one of the most famous lay members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. He became the first conscientious objector in history to be awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. Even though millions of American military personnel experienced combat in World War II, the U.S. military would award only 473 of the nation's highest military honor.¹

Early Life

Birth did not set Doss up for any notoriety. Desmond Thomas Doss was born, the middle of three children, into a working-class family in Lynchburg, Virginia, on February 7, 1919. His father, William Thomas Doss, a carpenter by trade, had recently returned from service in the Great War. His mother, Bertha Edward Doss, was a homemaker and sometimes shoe factory worker. Desmond's upbringing powerfully impacted his subsequent life choices and life story. Growing up, Desmond experienced an alcoholic father who, in an altercation with an uncle, pulled out a gun and pointed it at his relative. Bertha stepped in front of the gun, demanding it from her husband and giving it to Desmond, telling him to run and hide it. Young Desmond vowed never to touch a gun again. From his mother's teaching and example, Desmond developed a deep faith in God and adherence to the biblical Ten Commandments as a devout Seventh-day Adventist. Two of these commandments, the fourth and sixth, would constitute two of the three religious convictions that would define Doss's life and story.



Desmond Doss, 1951.

Photo courtesy of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Archives.

His Principles

When the Second World War expanded to the United States in the form of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, Desmond Doss was a shipyard worker in Virginia. As an essential worker in what was now an important wartime industry, Desmond was eligible for a deferment from the draft. Further, as a committed Seventh-day Adventist whose personal religious beliefs compelled him to keep the Sabbath holy and to not kill, Desmond could have remained at the shipyard, with his Sabbaths secured and the killing far away. Instead, Desmond's third religious conviction, that of loving and serving his fellow humans as himself, drove him to believe that it was his moral duty to serve his country and his fellow humans in any and all circumstances, even to the point of risking his own life.

Becoming a Government Issue (G.I.)

In the spring of 1942, Desmond T. Doss was inducted into military service with the United States as a participant in what was quickly becoming the largest conflict in human history. Doss willingly joined this human cataclysm but registered as a conscientious objector. The title of the classification rankled Doss, and he would repeatedly state that he was a conscientious cooperator, but against all possible pressure he would consistently refuse to bear arms, to handle weapons, or to kill.² Doss was not willing to fight in the war, he was willing to serve in the war. Desmond applied for the 1-A-0 non-combat classification and assumed that the U.S. Army would assign him to a medical unit, which the Adventist Church had tried to formalize with the U.S. military through a series of agreements and which Congress confirmed when it passed The Selective Service and Training Act of 1940. Section (g) of the bill made clear: "Nothing contained in this Act shall be construed to require any person to be subject to combatant training and service in the land or naval forces the United States who, by reason of religious training and belief, is conscientiously opposed to participation in war in any form."³ Despite his intentions and assumptions, Doss fell through the cracks of the rapidly expanding U.S. Army, being assigned to an infantry battalion of the 77th Division. The U.S. Army wanted Private Doss to become a skilled rifleman so he could kill as many enemy soldiers as possible. This difference of conviction would pit Doss against the very military that he wanted to serve.

Desmond Doss had a great many liabilities stacked against him as he joined the 77th Division. He was from rural Virginia in the Statue of Liberty Division that drew mainly from urban New York City. Not only was his southern drawl out of place, but he was slight of frame, quiet, modest, and pious. He didn't smoke, didn't drink alcohol, and refused to eat unclean meat. He also politely refused all orders from all rank of officer to touch or train with a weapon or to do non-essential work on the Sabbath, though he eagerly offered to work all Sundays, the traditional day off in the U.S. military. As a result, he endured official and unofficial verbal and physical abuse, intimidation, and threats, to the point of undergoing a Section Eight discharge trial where his commanding officers attempted to force him out of the military on the grounds that he was mentally unfit for service.⁴

Desmond successfully resisted the discharge proceedings and shipped out with the 77th Division's 302nd Medical Battalion as a medic imbedded with the men of 2nd Platoon, Company B, 1st Battalion, 307th Infantry Regiment, 77th Division.⁵

As one of millions of men in the Pacific Theater of the Second World War, Desmond Doss was of no special significance when he arrived. Many of his fellow soldiers considered conscientious objectors as lazy cowards. Desmond's strict religious convictions further set him apart. Private Doss did everything he could within his convictions, and driven by them, to serve any man in need and instance-by-instance began to change the minds of his comrades. When the 77th took part in the liberation of Guam, Private Doss distinguished himself in the courageous care he provided for his unit, receiving a Bronze Star. He would receive a second Bronze Star during the liberation of Leyte.⁶ For someone like Doss, whose contemporaries universally described him as humble, earning medals was not the point. In Guam and in the Philippines, Doss regularly and without hesitation, exposed himself to lethal force in order to help wounded men. Doss's self-sacrificial love for his fellow humanity was the religious conviction that would define his story and came directly out of his desire to follow the example of his Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Doss made this clear at the time to the men around him and, as an inspirational speaker, the rest of his life. The Battle of Okinawa, however, placed Doss into the crosshairs of the war and history like few would experience.

Okinawa

The context and conditions surrounding Doss' actions in Okinawa are essential to understanding just how incredible his decisions were as he chose to live out his convictions. Private Doss was not in the right place at the right time to become well known. Instead, within some of the most unimaginably difficult conditions over days and weeks, he shone like a beacon of authentic Christian goodness in a world consumed by unprecedented self-destruction. Doss was, in fact, in one of the worst places at one of the worst times, making his actions all the more remarkable.

The strategy of the U.S. military in the Pacific Theater was to launch twin advances, one from New Guinea and the other across the Central Pacific, each taking only necessary bases along the way and converging on the Philippines, which the U.S. invaded in late 1944. Almost at the exact geographic center of the distance from the Philippines to the southern-most Japanese home islands lay Okinawa Island. For Japanese military planners, Okinawa was home turf, a prefecture of Japan itself and essential to the defense of the rest of the Japanese home islands. For the U.S. military, taking Okinawa was the only viable base from which to stage the invasion of the main Japanese islands and force an end to the war.

At the center of the Japanese defense of Okinawa was the Shuri defensive line, built along the highest and most rugged sections of southern Okinawa. At the center of the Shuri line lay the Maeda Escarpment, 400ft above sea level and capped with a 40-70ft vertical cliff. The GIs called it "Hacksaw Ridge" or "the big escarpment."⁷ For

nearly the last two weeks of April, three U.S. divisions (7th, 27th, and 96th) tried to breach the line and only made it to the base of Hacksaw Ridge. Over those two weeks of constant combat, daytime assaults on heavily fortified underground and concealed positions, nighttime defense against Japanese infiltration and surprise counterattacks, the three divisions exhausted their supply of combat troops all to achieve an advance of a mere 3000 yards. On April 30, the 77th Division that Doss belonged to moved into the center of the line to continue the assault. One of the division's three infantry regiments, the 307th, along with Doss, deployed right under the cliff face, and for the next 32 days they would fight to advance over the escarpment, across an exposed, rocky plateau, and down the heavily fortified reverse slope.⁸ During that month's duration, the division would advance 3500 yards through the Shuri line along a front only 1000-yard wide, in the face of determined defense by 14,000 entrenched Japanese soldiers.⁹

The amount of fire-power that each side threw into this fight was tremendous. The 77th Division history declared, "Never had Pacific veterans seen Japanese artillery in such quantity or encountered such effective use of it."¹⁰ On the American side, the official U.S. Army history stated, large shipborne guns or "naval gunfire was employed longer and in greater quantities in the battle of Okinawa than any other in history." Yet, at Okinawa even "the greatest concentration of artillery ever employed in the Pacific war... scarcely touched...the Japanese deep in their caves." Soldiers on foot with hand-held weapons (rifles, machine guns, grenades, satchels of high explosives, and cans of gasoline) bore the brunt of the fighting. Under these conditions, the casualties were very high and constant.¹¹ For combat medics, like Desmond Doss, the work was unrelenting and could not be more dangerous. Day after day, Doss was carrying out heroic rescues of wounded men in a battlefield under intensive enemy and friendly fire.

Within a few days, Pfc. Doss was the only medic left in his entire company. On May 5, amid another U.S. attempt to clear Hacksaw Ridge, an island-wide Japanese counterattack drove nearly all able-bodied U.S. soldiers off the escarpment, leaving over half the company dead or wounded up on the ridge. One able-bodied U.S. soldier remained. Desmond Doss was still on the ridge trying to save the wounded. Twenty minutes after the rout, U.S. soldiers below the cliff spotted Doss hand-lowering a wounded man down a litter suspended by a rope. An officer ordered Doss off the escarpment, but Doss went back for another wounded soldier. Trip after trip, Doss crossed the fire-swept plateau amid incoming mortar, artillery, rifle, and machine gun fire, praying to God that he could get "just one more."¹² Each rescue required stabilizing treatment of a wounded man, being helped, pulled, and/or carried by Doss, until he could bring them to the edge of the cliff, secure each wounded soldier in a rope harness of Doss's own design, and then lower them with his own strength the forty feet to other army personnel. Doss kept going back until he could find no more, even treating and rescuing wounded Japanese soldiers. Such was his commitment to practice self-sacrificial love as Christ loved.

The exact number of men Doss rescued will remain unknown. That day Doss's commanding officer, Captain Vernon, had taken 155 men up the escarpment in the attack. By the end of the day, there were 55 men left standing. He reasoned that everyone else, the dead and the wounded, had come down via Doss's efforts. In his

humility, Doss estimated that it could not have been more than 50, as even that number seemed impossible. Captain Vernon split the difference at 75, and after gathering accounts to verify the Congressional Medal of Honor recommendation that Captain Vernon and the men of Company B provided, the army verified that Doss attempted to rescue at least 75 soldiers on that day.¹³ Looked at another way, through constant prayer and a willingness to lay down his life for his brother, Pfc. Desmond T. Doss, a man who refused to kill, even in the center of a massive conflict of human self-destruction, single-handedly rescued at least half the men in his company in a single day. Unfortunately for Doss, the war all around him did not stop when he finally came down the rope himself.

The next day the shattered 307th regiment cycled off the front for a brief rest and to take on replacements. Doss's 1st Battalion had approached the escarpment with a strength of 800 men on April 29. When they came down on May 7, they were down to only 324.¹⁴ The three battalions of the 77th Division took on over two thousand inexperienced replacements and with as many lightly wounded men as could return in the next few days, received orders to once again attack at the front by May 11. Though the new men were healthy and courageous, their inexperience was a danger to themselves and to those around them, creating even more desperate situations for medics like Doss.¹⁵

A Hard Road Home

After another week of attacks and clearing of Japanese defenses one by one, Doss's 1st Battalion was part of a rare pre-dawn surprise attack. Despite all attempts at coordination, friendly fire, due to inexperience, gave away the element of surprise, and the Japanese caught Doss's Company B in the open, attacking with mortars and grenades.¹⁶ One grenade landed in a shell hole where Doss and two other soldiers had taken cover. Either trying to kick or step on the sputtering fuse that lit the grenade in the dark, Doss took the blast in his left leg, suffering seventeen punctures by jagged metal fragments.¹⁷ Bleeding and lame in one leg, Doss began crawling back toward friendly lines, treating himself and multiple wounded soldiers along the way, including his commanding officer. After a few hours some of Doss's friends who were stretcher bearers found him and began carrying him, but when a mortar attack forced them to cover, Desmond rolled off the stretcher insisting they take a more seriously injured soldier first.¹⁸ A wounded soldier who came across Doss offered to help Desmond to the rear and as the two stumped back, sniper fire caught Doss in his left arm, breaking it in two places. Miraculously, Doss survived his wounds long enough for his comrades to get him back to an aid station, where he received stabilizing care, and an evacuation order on May 21. The conscientious cooperators' daily experience of fighting to save lives amidst a world war was over.

Life Anew

When Desmond Doss left home to volunteer to serve his country, he encountered a military organization and countless individuals who doubted him and made clear they did not think he belonged in the military. During three major campaigns of the Pacific War, Desmond Doss so completely demonstrated the sacrificial love of his Savior to all those around him, while holding tight to his religious convictions, that when Company B received word that Doss had lost his treasured Bible the day he was wounded, the men searched across the battlefield until they found the Bible of their beloved medic.¹⁹ The War Department's press release about Doss put it plainly when it stated, "Private Doss ... received the unstinting praise of fighting men of the 77th Division from generals to privates."²⁰ Generals now saluted him, his country wanted to celebrate him, and President Truman invited Desmond to a ceremony at the White House where Truman personally hung the medal around Desmond's neck. Coming back to the United States had been a whirl of hospitals, press interviews, reconnection with family and loved ones, and celebrity events. The real return to civilian life would take longer and be more difficult than the celebrity return, but Desmond Doss met it with his characteristic steadfast connection with his Savior.

During the war Desmond had imagined various postwar futures, from going back to carpentry to a career in medicine. After his wounds on Okinawa, however, those options evaporated. Just months after the end of the war, Desmond was diagnosed with tuberculosis that he had likely contracted on Leyte and been plagued with during the war. Years of treatment would save his life, but at the cost of a lung and five ribs. Despite effectively being a disabled veteran the remainder of his life, Desmond was a devoted husband to Dorothy (Schutte), whom he met at church during his military training and married before shipping out. He was also a loving father of Desmond "Tommy" Doss Jr., who was born just after Desmond shipped out and with whom he could not have contact during the years of tuberculous treatment.²¹ Despite all the near-death experiences during the war and the health challenges after, Desmond Doss lived a full life, dying on March 23, 2006.

Legacy

Doss has been the subject of numerous biographies, multiple documentaries, scores of articles in mainstream media over decades, and the main character in the feature-length film, *Hacksaw Ridge*, that won two of its six Oscar nominations at the Academy Awards. Doss has had sections of three U.S. highways named after him, as well as an SDA academy, a U.S. Army clinic, a guest house at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, and a Cold War Medical Cadet Corps training camp.²² He was not famous because of the books he wrote, nor for the professional skills he developed, nor for his career achievements. Desmond Doss is an internationally recognized name because of the actions he took as a combat medic in World War II while refusing to bear arms. These actions and Doss's story resulted from three religious convictions that he refused to compromise on, even amid the most challenging of circumstances.

The legacy of Desmond T. Doss to the Seventh-Day Adventist Church remains straightforward and entirely positive. His legacy outside of the church greatly improved the general perception of the church and its

members from the perspective of the U.S. military, the U.S. government, and of the population at large. Through his unswerving conviction to his religious principles, especially keeping the Sabbath holy, refusing to kill, and emulating Christ in his willingness to lay down his life in the care of the needs of others, the Desmond Doss story has always been inseparable from the beliefs of the church. It is almost impossible to find a reference to Desmond Doss that does not include the name Seventh-day Adventist. The person most responsible for this was not Booton Herndon, who worked with Desmond to memorialize his story in print in *The Unlikeliest Hero*. It was not Terry Benedict and his award-winning 2004 documentary movie *The Conscientious Objector*. Nor was it Mel Gibson and his blockbuster movie *Hacksaw Ridge*. From start to finish, the legacy of Desmond Doss and the powerful linkage between his actions and the Seventh-day Adventist Church was the result of the consistent words and actions of Desmond Doss, empowered by his relationship with Jesus. Corporal Doss and Mr. Doss remain one of the most effective banner bearers of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the church's history. All during his time in the military, in and out of combat, Desmond always explained his actions by talking about his beliefs. Throughout his postwar life, Desmond made continuous contributions to the Seventh-day Adventist Church year after year, always being willing to speak at camp meetings, churches, and schools. Decades before most veterans of World War II spoke out about their war experiences, Desmond Doss humbly was speaking out about how his God helped him help those in need around him during the war. The most important legacy of Desmond T. Doss continues to be the inspiration his story provides to the world over.

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NOTES

1. The National World War II Museum, website, <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/topics/medal-honor-recipient-world-war-ii#:~:text=In%20World%20War%20II%2C%20many,of%20a%20life%20cut%20short.>
2. Booton Herndon, *The Unlikeliest Hero: The Story of Desmond T. Doss, Conscientious Objector Who Won His Nation's Highest Military Honor* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1967), 18.
3. Selective Training and Service Act of 1940, Public Law 783, 76th Cong., 3d Sess. (September 16, 1940), 885. <https://govtrackus.s3.amazonaws.com/legislink/pdf/stat/54/STATUTE-54-Pg885a.pdf>.
4. Herndon, 44-45.
5. Appleman, Burns, Gugeler, & Stevens. *U.S. Army in World War II: The War in the Pacific: Okinawa: The Last Battle*, 281. U.S. Department of the Army (<https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USA/USA-P-Okinawa/USA-P-Okinawa-11.html>).
6. Men Who Were There, *Ours to Hold It High: the History of the 77th Division in World War II*. Washington Infantry Journal Press, 1947 (https://archive.org/stream/OursToHoldItHigh/OursToHoldItHigh_djvu.txt).
7. Appleman, 274.
8. Building underground defenses into the reverse slope offered the Japanese the best defense against overwhelming U.S. firepower. This meant that U.S. infantry had to approach nearly every Japanese position on foot and use hand-held weapons to knock them out. This, in turn, led to a very high rate of attrition among front-line infantry, who relied on combat medics to stabilize their wounds until they could reach aid stations behind the lines.
9. *Ours to Hold It High*, 293.
10. Appleman, 250.
11. *Ibid.*, 253, 255.
12. *The Conscientious Objector*, directed by Terry Benedict (Chaparral West, CA: D'Artagnan Entertainment, 2004), Roku Channel.
13. Herndon, 124, 158.

14. Appleman, 264, *Ours to Hold It High*, 43.
15. *Ours to Hold It High*, 346.
16. *Ibid.*, 351-352.
17. Herndon, 149.
18. CPL Desmond Thomas Doss, Medal of Honor Citation. <https://militaryhallofhonor.com/honoree-record.php?id=1370#:~:text=Medal%20of%20Honor%20Citation&text=Pfc.,a%20cliff%20to%20friendly%20hands>.
19. Herndon, 153-154.
20. *Ibid.*, 160.
21. *Ibid.*, 26, 184.
22. A section of US Route 501 in Virginia (<https://wikimapia.org/street/16534521/U-S-Route-501-P-F-C-Desmond-T-Doss-Memorial-Expressway>), part of Georgia Highway 2 (<https://www.upi.com/Archives/1990/07/10/Road-named-for-medal-of-honor-winner/6792647582400/>), and part of Alabama Highway 9 (https://www.northwestgeorgianews.com/archive/doss-memorial-highway-honors-world-war-ii-hero/article_242f0287-4dd1-58f8-b185-95587eac8530.html). Camp Desmond T. Doss was in Grand Ledge Michigan, 1950-1972. Desmond T. Doss Academy in Lynchburg Virginia (<https://desmonddoss.org/>). Desmond T. Doss Health Clinic Schofield Barracks in Hawaii (<https://desmond-doss.tricare.mil/>).

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