



Written by [Michael E. Telzrow](#) on November 7, 2016

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## Desmond Doss: His Only Weapon Was His Conscience

*He refused to touch a gun, yet wanted to serve his country during World War II. After being mocked and badgered for his pacifism, he became a hero and the first “conscientious objector” in U.S. history to be awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. His incredible story is depicted in the movie Hacksaw Ridge, directed by Mel Gibson and starring Andrew Garfield as Desmond Doss. The article that follows is not about the movie but about the real-life Doss.*



The grenade landed at his feet with a thud. While three other soldiers in Company B of the 307th Infantry scrambled for shelter in a foxhole, Army Company Aid Man, Private First Class Desmond Doss attempted to kick the deadly projectile away with his heavy combat boot. He had only one thought in his mind, and that was to protect his beloved men. Unable to kick the grenade clear, Doss was rocked by an ear-splitting explosion that sent 17 pieces of white-hot shrapnel into his body. Treating himself for shock, he took refuge in the foxhole with his platoon mates and spent a terrifying five hours within yards of the enemy on Okinawa.

The next day, litter bearers made their way to his position and loaded Doss on a stretcher bound for the safety of an aid station. On the way, they encountered a soldier with a serious head wound. Sensing the severity of the soldier’s wounds, Doss rolled off the stretcher and insisted that the wounded man take his place. Swapping places with the wounded soldier was typical of Doss. By then his deep concern and compassion for his comrades was legendary among the men of the 307th Infantry Regiment. From Guam to Leyte and now Okinawa, Doss had repeatedly placed the safety of his men above his own. When the bloody Okinawa campaign finally ended, Doss had etched his name in the annals of military history as the first conscientious objector to be awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for bravery under fire.

History sometimes teaches us that men and women of conviction often rise from the most humble of backgrounds. Greatness is not the sole domain of the powerful or rich, but is often found where one least expects it. Desmond Doss was born on February 7, 1919, in Lynchburg, Virginia. The son of William Thomas Doss, a carpenter, and Bertha Edward Oliver Doss, a shoemaker, he was raised in a devout Seventh Day Adventist family. Ever since he was a young boy, he had been immersed in a faith-based environment, and it exerted a most profound effect upon his life. He formed a deep respect for the 10 Commandments. As a young lad, he was particularly interested in a lithographic print depicting the illustrated Commandments that hung on the wall in his Lynchburg home. One image in particular held his interest. The subject of the Sixth Commandment was the murder of Abel by his brother Cain. The image of Cain with a club in his hand standing over his slain brother caused Doss to ponder the act. “I wondered how in the world could a brother do such a thing? It put a horror in my heart of just killing; and as a result, I took it personally, Desmond, if you love me, you won’t kill.”



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As a young man, Desmond cared for the sick of his community and church, and generally wanted to help others. He seemed to have an inherent desire to assist those in need. By the time he was 21, Doss was a deacon in the Seventh Day Adventist Church.

## “Conscientious Cooperator”

In 1941, Doss secured a job as a ship joiner in the naval shipyards at Newport News, Virginia. Before the declaration of war, Doss had registered as a conscientious objector, or 1AO status as it was defined by the Army. At first, Doss was against such a designation. He had always linked conscientious objectors with sedition and unpatriotic attitudes. He felt he was anything but that. He wanted to serve his country by caring for the sick and wounded, and bristled at the thought that he would be associated with less honorable men. Despite his unwavering belief in the Sixth Commandment, and his strong Seventh Day Adventist conviction of observing the Sabbath on Saturday, Doss felt he could serve his country as well as anyone. In the end he acquiesced, but always referred to himself as a “conscientious cooperator.”

For obvious reasons, he specifically requested assignment to medical duty, but partially because that way he could reconcile his beliefs with working seven days a week, because as he said in his own words, “Christ healed on the Sabbath.” Later in life he explained, “I felt like it was an honor to serve my country according to the dictates of my conscience.” In 1942, his number came up, and Doss did what millions of other Americans did in WWII — he left the safety of his civilian job and embarked upon an adventure that would change his life.

Before he left for active duty, Doss married the love of his life, Dorothy Pauline Schutte, of Richmond, Virginia, on August 17, 1942. It was a marriage that would sustain him throughout the war, and until her accidental death in 1991. After induction and assignment, Doss became a company aid man with the 307th Infantry, 77th Division, United States Army. Almost immediately, he faced routine and unmerciful harassment from his platoon mates. He was mocked and derided for his devotion to prayer, refusal to even touch a weapon, or perform drills and fatigue on Saturdays. Even by the standards of the 1940s, Doss was an anomaly. He eschewed alcohol and gambling, never smoked, and was steadfast in his faithfulness to Dorothy. Naturally, his convictions were seen as old-fashioned and extreme. It was a mix that was sometimes at odds with the more cosmopolitan recruits from the larger cities. Naturally, some of the men resented Doss’s convictions and especially chafed at the idea that he would be excused from Saturday duty. For Doss’s part he did all he could to observe the Seventh Day Adventist Sabbath observance. He even went as far as to work 24 hours on Sunday, and he would later recount how he would swap duty days with a Catholic soldier who wanted to attend Mass on Sundays.

Doss’s refusal to compromise his religious beliefs and train with weapons prompted his battalion commander, Colonel Gerald Cooney, to consider sending Doss back to the United States for non-combat duty. Cooney later recounted on a television episode of *This Is Your Life* that Doss “wouldn’t even touch a rifle.” Cooney relented only after Doss’s company commander convinced him otherwise, and that the army medic could be depended upon when the times got rough. Prior to that incident, Doss had been threatened with court-martial for refusing to handle a rifle and had been considered for discharge as a psychological case. Throughout it all, Doss remained steadfast in his convictions and belief that he could perform the duties of a medic without resorting to handling weapons of any kind.

Once the fighting started, however, the harassment ended. On the island of Guam, Doss changed the



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minds of his fellow soldiers. The liberation of Guam afforded Doss the opportunity to practice what he had learned in combat medical training, but just as important, it allowed him to prove his worth on the battlefield. From July 21, 1944 through August 10, Doss and the men of the 77th Infantry Division slogged through the jungles of Guam from the southern end of the island to the northern tip, in what was a continuous struggle against a determined Japanese foe. Doss, while not even officially assigned as the unit medic, went out routinely with the advancing forces in the stifling heat of the small Pacific island. He repeatedly removed wounded men from the deadly front, often under intense fire from the enemy. Unarmed and unafraid, Doss saved dozens of men from certain death. Later, in December action at Leyte in the Philippines, Doss traversed an open field under intense fire to assist and retrieve two wounded soldiers. Realizing one was dead, Doss carried the surviving soldier back to a jungle area where he constructed a stretcher out of bamboo and removed the soldier to a safer area. In the end he was awarded the Bronze Star with an Oak Leaf Cluster for his actions on Guam and Leyte. More importantly, he earned the respect of his fellow soldiers. Later, Doss would speak of his actions there: “I knew these men; they were my buddies, some had wives and children. If they were hurt, I wanted to be there to take care of them.”

## Cliffhanger Rescues

Following Guam and Leyte, the 77th Division found itself as part of the 10th Army under the command of General Simon Bolivar Buckner, Jr., the son of a Confederate General. The objective of the 10th Army was to assault and take control of Okinawa, a small island in the Ryukyu Islands chain, and a mere 350 miles from the Japanese home islands. There, they would face stiff and savage resistance. Before they even got there, the 5th U.S. Fleet suffered major losses from Japanese Kamikaze strikes — 10 major attacks in all. The 5th Fleet sustained 10,000 casualties, half of which were killed in action. Twenty-eight American ships were sunk, but it did not deter the Americans, who launched one of the largest amphibious landings of the war on April 1, 1945.

Soon after landing on the southern end of the island, it became apparent that the U.S. forces were facing a determined, well-entrenched foe across the entire island — coast to coast. The Japanese employed a now-common defensive technique characterized by intricate and elaborate underground positions, supported by expert use of knee mortars, machine guns, and ferocious frontal attacks. Buckner rejected any idea of a flanking amphibious assault and opted for a series of bloody frontal attacks. From Guadalcanal to Okinawa, the Japanese employed tactics that took advantage of the terrain; especially reverse slopes and escarpments. It was on one such escarpment — the Maeda Escarpment, a 400-foot high, jagged coral ridge — where Doss would write his name in the history books.

Since April 26, various American units of the 24th and 96th Divisions had been engaged in fierce battle with the Japanese at the Maeda Escarpment. After an artillery barrage of 1,616 rounds, the attack had been launched. The 383rd Infantry easily moved into position at the base of the escarpment, but when the men reached the crest, they suffered 18 casualties in a matter of minutes. The Japanese held Maeda like a vise grip. The geographical fortress was packed with pill boxes, hidden machine gun emplacements, and caves, and it was defended by a foe willing to fight to the death. Despite slight advances on Hills 150 and 152 on April 27, no American forces were able to secure the escarpment. The battle see-sawed back and forth and on April 29, the men of the 307th Infantry went into action. It was here where Private Desmond Doss became the first conscientious objector to perform battle actions that



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would secure for him the nation's highest military award.

Moving into action, the men of Company B, 307th Infantry, cleared the base of the escarpment with flame throwers, grenades, and small-arms fire. Fighting every inch of the way, the men reached the base of the escarpment, exhausted and spent. They had battled innumerable counterattacks, terrifying night battles, and hand-to-hand combat. Daily airstrikes were employed to dislodge the Japanese from their dug-in positions. It had taken Lt. Colonel Gerald D. Cooney's men of the 307th five days to gain control of Needle Rock to the left of the top of the escarpment. It had taken the battalion nine attempts to finally secure Needle Rock.

During the night of April 30, the unit brought up five naval cargo nets that Doss helped splice together, and four 50-foot ladders to aid in climbing the peak. On May 1, men of Company A attempted to secure the top of the escarpment by using the ladders. Every man was killed or wounded as soon as he stood up. Company B fared little better. After securing the edge of the escarpment, they were driven off with heavy casualties by a relentless Japanese counterattack. A five-man squad from Company B was mowed down by enemy fire. Doss, as he had done before on Guam and Leyte, crawled on his belly four times to rescue his wounded comrades. On May 2, Companies A and B went back to the edge of the escarpment, but failed to make progress. They tried again on May 3, but were hammered by Japanese knee mortars, grenades, and 81-mm mortar fire from the reverse slope of the escarpment.

On May 4, the men of the 1st Battalion, 307th infantry continued their fierce fighting with the Japanese. A successful demolition assault cleared a pillbox and cave complex that had been very troublesome, but the enemy was not ready to yield. From camouflaged positions, the Japanese poured a devastating enfilading fire into the Americans. The men of the 307th, those who could still stand, broke for the safety of the rear. Only Doss remained. Aided by covering fire from the remnants of his battalion, Private Doss moved inexorably from one casualty to the other, administering emergency first aid and dragging them to the edge of the escarpment where he lowered them to safety using a litter technique that he had devised back in training at Elkins, West Virginia. Using a series of bowline knots, Doss fashioned a sling that secured each man's legs through loops and doubled around the chest. It was perfect and ensured that lowering the wounded over the jagged cliff would not result in any additional injuries. For five harrowing hours, Doss went from wounded man to wounded man. Exposed to enemy fire, Doss could only attribute his survival to divine intervention. By the time he was finished, a blood-soaked Desmond Doss had saved at least 75 men, although his commanders thought it was closer to 100. Captain Jack Glover of the 1st Battalion remarked years later when asked about what Doss did during the fighting for the escarpment, "We fought many days on the escarpment and had to leave casualties behind. Doss refused to seek cover."

American losses on the escarpment had been heavy. The 1st Battalion lost over 400 men, but the battle was not over for Doss and the men of the 307th. Two weeks later, on May 12, moments after a wounded Doss had given up his stretcher to a man in need, a Japanese sniper bullet slammed into the medic's arm. The bullet had entered his wrist, exited his elbow and lodged in his upper arm. His arm was shattered and nerves were damaged. Quickly, Doss asked a man named Brooks for his rifle. A dismayed Brooks handed the rifle to the one man in the company who had never touched a weapon. Doss had no intention of using it for its intended purpose. Instead he asked Brooks to help him fashion a splint for his severely damaged arm. When he finally got to the aid station, Doss passed out.



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## **Damaged Body, Undamaged Faith**

His wounds were his ticket home, but not before surgery to remove 17 pieces of Japanese shrapnel and the setting of his broken arm. While on board a hospital ship, Desmond Doss discovered that his Bible was missing. He guessed that it had been lost as a result of the grenade explosion, and he quickly sent word back to his unit to be on the lookout for it. Remarkably, they were able to recover a scorched and somewhat damp Bible in the general area where Doss had been wounded. In Doss's mind, the reunification with the Holy Book was another sign of God's intervention and benevolence.

For his actions on the Maeda Escarpment, Desmond T. Doss was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor — the first and one of only three awarded to conscientious objectors. The citation read in part: "Through his outstanding bravery and unflinching determination in the face of desperately dangerous conditions, Pfc. Doss saved the lives of many soldiers. His name became a symbol throughout the 77th Infantry Division for outstanding gallantry far above and beyond the call of duty." Subsequently, he was promoted to corporal and received the nation's highest military honor at the White House on October 12, 1945. The man once reviled and mocked by his beloved comrades was now a symbol of courage and bravery for the entire division.

Following the war, Doss spent nearly six years in and out of veterans and military hospitals recovering from his wounds and a case of tuberculosis that he had likely acquired while in service to his country. The disease robbed him of one lung and five ribs that were removed in an attempt to save him. Doss never fully recovered. In 1954, he moved his small family to northwest Georgia near the town of Rising Fawn. There, along with Dorothy and his son, Tommy, Doss tried to make a go of farming, but his injuries and lack of one lung made it extremely difficult. He devoted much of his time to Seventh Day Adventist programs and spoke publicly about his experiences after appearing on a television episode of *This Is Your Life* in 1959. His beloved wife, Dorothy, passed away as the result of an automobile accident in 1991, and Doss married Frances Duman in 1993.

In July 2000, six years before succumbing to cancer, the old soldier wrote these words after receiving favorable medical news: "I love God and Christ with all my heart, I have always tried to keep his Ten Commandments. The principles of the commandments are included in the Golden Rule, and I feel that I received the Congressional Medal of Honor because of the love God gave me for my fellow men."

Ever a man of conviction and faith, Desmond T. Doss finally succumbed to cancer on March 23, 2006, in Piedmont, Alabama.

*Photo: President Truman presents Desmond Doss with the Congressional Medal of Honor*



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