

DESMOND THOMAS DOSS

Virginia Native ~ Shipbuilder ~ Conscientious Objector ~ Army Medic

Medal of Honor Recipient

On October 12, 1945, a 26 year-old Army medic, still recovering from multiple wounds he received during a series of bloody battles on Okinawa earlier that year, was the guest of honor at a ceremony at the White House. President (and World War I veteran) Harry S. Truman held a Medal of Honor in his hand as he said: "I would rather have this medal than to be President." Then, he placed the Medal of Honor around the neck of Corporal Desmond Thomas Doss.



Desmond Doss was the first of only three conscientious objectors to ever receive the nation's highest military decoration. The other two, both of whom were also army medics, were killed in action in Viet Nam while tending wounded and were posthumously named to receive the Medal of Honor.

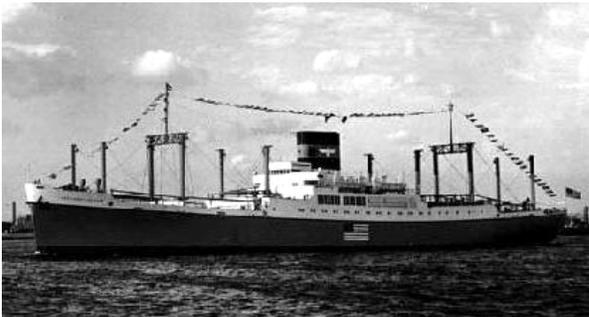
Usually, when people think of Medal of Honor recipients, they picture soldiers rushing into battle with guns blazing. But that description does not fit Desmond Doss. Although he repeatedly rushed into battle, heedless of his own safety, this brave American never carried or fired a weapon. But he was fearless on the battlefield, and more importantly, he also saved an untold number of men's lives.

The Medal of Honor is bestowed on members of the armed forces who distinguish themselves through "conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his or her life above and beyond the call of duty while engaged in an action against an enemy of the United States". That criteria is so strict, many who are accorded that honor do not survive to wear the medal.

That standard was met, and more, by Desmond Doss' heroic actions on Okinawa on May 5, 1945, when he single-handedly rescued 75 wounded infantrymen. His Medal of Honor citation, which fully describes his accomplishments, that day and on subsequent days, is provided at the end of this article.

Desmond Doss was born in Lynchburg, Virginia on February 7, 1919, the son of Tom and Betha Doss, who raised him as a strict Seventh Day Adventist. From an early age, he was greatly influenced by the bible and its teachings. His father was a carpenter. Desmond followed in his footsteps, becoming a cabinetmaker. Desmond Doss quit school after the eighth grade to help support his family.

He was employed at the Newport News Shipbuilding & Dry Dock Company (NNS) on April 11, 1941. Like many young men of that time, he was apparently drawn to the Virginia Peninsula by the abundance of work underway there as the nation geared up for the distinct possibility of war. He was assigned to the Joiner Department, where non-structural dividers (called joiner bulkheads), railing caps and other items made of wood were still being installed onboard ships.



He may have been assigned to toil in the Joiner Shop. Quite possibly, he may have worked on one or more of seven passenger/cargo ships built in Newport News between 1940 and 1942. These handsome vessels were amongst the last NNS-built ships whose design featured a lot of interior wooden fine finish work.

In April 1942, Desmond Doss was drafted by the Army. He was offered a deferment by his boss because of his job in an essential industry. He refused, saying: *"I felt like it was an honor to serve my country, according to the dictates of my conscience."*

But there was a problem: Even though Desmond wanted to help his country in time of war, he refused to even pick up, much less use a gun. The draft board told him that if he wasn't going to carry a weapon, then they would have to label him as a conscientious objector.

That stigma did not sit well with Desmond Doss. He said that he would gladly serve, wear a uniform, salute the flag, help with the war effort by tending hurt people. But he could not kill. He asked to be classified as a 'conscientious cooperator', but was told there was no such thing.

Acting on sage advice from his minister, who had accompanied him to meet with the draft board, Desmond reluctantly accepted the classification of 1-A-O, Conscientious Objector. Years later, this lanky native Virginian noted: *"I didn't want to be known as a draft dodger, but I sure didn't know what I was getting into."*

On April 1, 1942, he was inducted into the Army and sent to Fort Jackson, South Carolina for basic training. The previous year, he had begun dating Dorothy Schutte. Deeply in love, they initially decided they should wait until after the war to get married. Before he departed, Dorothy gave him a small, pocket-size Bible.

Army life was exceedingly tough for Desmond. His religious convictions marked him as an immediate misfit in boot camp and during later assignments because his Sabbath ran from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday. He was ostracized by the officers and men in his unit. Trained as a medic, he was sent to Fort Pickett, Virginia and assigned to the 77th Infantry Division; established during World War I and nicknamed the 'Statue of Liberty Division' because of the shoulder patch its members wore.



On August 17, 1942, before his unit left Virginia, Dorothy and Desmond were married. For the next several months, the 77th Infantry Division trained in Louisiana and Arizona before shipping out to the Pacific in March of 1944. During their first few months overseas, Desmond Doss and his comrades were thrown into battle on the island of Guam and in the Philippines. Desmond became respected by the men in his unit when he treated the wounded in the heat of battle.

Despite the enemy tactic of targeting medics, he repeatedly crawled forward through heavy enemy fire to care for his comrades. After two weeks of jungle fighting, Guam was secured and Desmond Doss was awarded the Bronze Star.

On April 1, 1945, the invasion of Okinawa began. In late April, his unit relieved another division on the front line. On May 5th, Desmond Doss' unit was ordered to attack a steep cliff four hundred feet high; called the Maeda Escarpment. By then, his fellow soldiers were accustomed to seeing Desmond reading his small bible and praying. They bowed their heads as Desmond offered a prayer for safety. Then they began the attack.

May 5th that year was a Saturday; Desmond's Sabbath. Telling himself that Christ had healed seven days a week, without hesitation he advanced with his unit.

During the early stages of the ensuing battle, his unit was not only successful, but not a single man was killed and there was only one minor injury in their quest to attain the top of that cliff.

However, Desmond and his comrades did not have long to enjoy their initial success. Under a barrage of artillery, mortar and machine gun fire, the enemy counterattacked. Dozens of American soldiers fell dead or wounded. The able-bodied survivors of that terrible onslaught retreated. Left at the top of the cliff were scores of wounded, the advancing Japanese...and Desmond Doss.

Under constant fire, often from just yards away, he tended the wounded, then dragged them, one by one, to the edge of the escarpment and lowered them to safety, using an improvised sling. Each time he got one of them to safety, he prayed: *"Dear God, let me get just one more man."* By nightfall, he had singlehandedly rescued many badly injured GI's; how many no one knows for sure.

When told of Desmond Doss' accomplishment, the commanding general of the 77th Division ordered preparation of the paperwork necessary to support a Medal of Honor recommendation. The Army estimated that the pacifist who had almost been declared unfit for military service had saved 100 lives. *"Couldn't be,"* Desmond is said to have modestly replied. *It couldn't have been more than 50."*

Only fifty...

When his Medal of Honor citation was created, they 'split the difference', crediting him with saving 75 wounded soldiers. Days later, Desmond reluctantly stood atop the cliff so this photograph could be taken to illustrate the near-impossibility of his accomplishment.





The struggle to secure Okinawa continued for weeks. Eventually Desmond's luck ran out. As detailed in his Medal of Honor citation, he continued to faithfully administer to the wounded on Okinawa until he was hit by enemy fire and wounded four times. Already wounded in his legs, when a bullet struck his arm, he improvised a splint from a rifle stock. It was the only time during the war that he handled a weapon.

On the way to a hospital ship, Desmond became extremely distressed when he discovered that he had lost the Bible Dorothy had given him. "Please," he begged, "get word back to my men. I've lost my Bible."

Evacuated to a hospital in Hawaii, he slowly recovered from multiple injuries. But then it was discovered that he had also contracted tuberculosis. That eventually led to five years of treatment in a VA hospital, and the loss of a lung.

When Desmond Doss got to Virginia, a welcome surprise was waiting for him there. The message about 'Doss' Bible' had been delivered. The soldiers who had once mocked the Seventh Day Adventist had returned to the Maeda Escarpment with a new mission and purpose. They fanned out across the rocky terrain and conducted a search until they found and mailed home Desmond's treasured Bible.



The bullet that was still in his arm was removed at the VA hospital in Waynesboro, Virginia. After the operation, he was transported to the nation's capital in the car of the hospital's commanding officer to receive his medal.



Most of his post-war years were spent dealing with health issues related to his time in the Pacific. Although disabled and unable to work, Desmond Doss spent a good deal of his remaining life attending patriotic functions and tirelessly telling his inspiring story. He also donated the \$100 per month stipend he received for being a Medal of Honor recipient to his community's Civil Defense service.

Whenever he appeared in public as a representative of Medal of Honor recipients, he wore his World War II uniform. It still fit, decades after his military service had ended.

During the latter part of his life, Desmond resided in a small town near Chattanooga, Tennessee. He passed away there on March 23, 2006 at the age of 87, due to a respiratory ailment. Approximately 500 people attended his funeral services at the Chattanooga National Cemetery, where he was interred with full military honors.

There are numerous memorials that celebrate his life and heroics: a Seventh Day Adventist school and the expressway in his hometown of Lynchburg; highways in Georgia and Alabama near Chattanooga; and the American Legion Post in the suburb of Chattanooga where he last resided. The most impressive tribute to his service is this expansive display in Veterans' Memorial Park in Chattanooga.



But there are more modest memorials to his memory that perhaps he would have found more suitable to denote his humble way of life. There is a bronze tablet, located on the top of the Maeda Escarpment, and a framed collage of photos and written material placed at the US Army medical clinic on Okinawa in 2007.

In addition, a guest house at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, DC was renamed in his honor in 2008. Doss Memorial Hall has thirty-two rooms for use by recovering wounded American warriors and the family members.

Extraordinary heroes like Desmond Doss often say that they are merely the caretakers of the medal for their comrades left behind on the battlefield. We accept that...because they say so. But we remain in awe of their accomplishments and are both inspired and humbled by their deeds so contrary to the basic human instincts of self-preservation and survival.

“I don’t consider myself to be a hero,” Desmond Doss said in 1987. “They were my men. I loved them and they loved me. I couldn’t go off and leave them, even if it cost me my life.”

Bill Lee
Memorial Day 2011



The President of the United States of America, authorized by Act of Congress, March 3, 1863, has awarded in the name of The Congress the MEDAL OF HONOR to

PRIVATE FIRST CLASS DESMOND T. DOSS
UNITED STATES ARMY

for service as set forth in the following

Citation: Private First Class *Desmond T. Doss*, United States Army, Medical Detachment, 307th Infantry, 77th Infantry Division. Near Urasoe-Mura, Okinawa, Ryukyu Islands, 29 April - 21 May 1945. He was a company aid man when the 1st Battalion assaulted a jagged escarpment 400 feet high. As our troops gained the summit, a heavy concentration of artillery, mortar and machinegun fire crashed into them, inflicting approximately 75 casualties and driving the others back. Private First Class *Doss* refused to seek cover and remained in the fire-swept area with the many stricken, carrying them one by one to the edge of the escarpment and there lowering them on a rope-supported litter down the face of a cliff to friendly hands. On 2 May, he exposed himself to heavy rifle and mortar fire in rescuing a wounded man 200 yards forward of the lines on the same escarpment; and two days later he treated four men who had been cut down while assaulting a strongly defended cave, advancing through a shower of grenades to within eight yards of enemy forces in a cave's mouth, where he dressed his comrades' wounds before making four separate trips under fire to evacuate them to safety. On 5 May, he unhesitatingly braved enemy shelling and small-arms fire to assist an artillery officer. He applied bandages, moved his patient to a spot that offered protection from small-arms fire and, while artillery and mortar shells fell close by, painstakingly administered plasma. Later that day, when an American was severely wounded by fire from a cave, Private First Class *Doss* crawled to him where he had fallen 25 feet from the enemy position, rendered aid, and carried him 100 yards to safety while continually exposed to enemy fire. On 21 May, in a night attack on high ground near Shuri, he remained in exposed territory while the rest of his company took cover, fearlessly risking the chance that he would be mistaken for an infiltrating Japanese and giving aid to the injured until he was himself seriously wounded in the legs by the explosion of a grenade. Rather than call another aid man from cover, he cared for his own injuries and waited five hours before litter bearers reached him and started carrying him to cover. The trio was caught in an enemy tank attack and Private First Class *Doss*, seeing a more critically wounded man nearby, crawled off the litter and directed the bearers to give their first attention to the other man. Awaiting the litter bearers' return, he was again struck, this time suffering a compound fracture of one arm. With magnificent fortitude he bound a rifle stock to his shattered arm as a splint and then crawled 300 yards over rough terrain to the aid station. Through his outstanding bravery and unflinching determination in the face of desperately dangerous conditions Private First Class *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.

October 12, 1945
THE WHITE HOUSE