

True Courage Under Fire

A true American hero – a seemingly unlikely one in the early years of his life – has passed from our midst. The dramatic story of his unwavering faith in God and his relentless commitment to the preservation of human life will stand as long as there is a United States of America.

Desmond T. Doss Sr., the first conscientious objector (he preferred the term conscientious cooperator) to win the Congressional Medal of Honor, died March 23 at the age of 87. More than 1,600 friends, family and admirers attended his funeral Saturday at the Collegedale Seventh-day Adventist Church. A graveside service was held Monday at the Chattanooga National Cemetery.

His life was one of extraordinary unselfishness and drama. Before his birth in 1919, Doss' parents had purchased a framed picture that contained both the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer in illustrated form. Doss was so fascinated by the pictures, especially one of Cain standing with a club in his hand over the dead body of his brother, Abel, that he would drag his chair over to where the picture hung on the wall. He hated the idea of one person killing another. He later commented that he was sure that it was this picture that made him determined never to harm another person.

With the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, Doss knew he would be drafted if he did not enlist, so that is what he chose to do. His minister went with him to establish his status as a non-combatant. The officer in charge told him there was no such thing but that he could register as a conscientious objector. Doss insisted he was not a conscientious objector because he would gladly serve his country, wear a uniform, salute the flag and help with the war effort. He would be happy to tend to sick or hurt people any day. Finally, he was convinced to accept the 1-A-O Conscientious Objector classification, so he could join the Army without fear of court martial.

At age 23, Doss entered the service as a medic for the 77th Infantry Division. From the beginning, the other men in his company made fun of Doss for his beliefs. Even though he worked long, hard hours to make up for not working on Saturday (the Seventh-day Adventist Church recognizes this as Sabbath), the men cursed, ridiculed and taunted him. Each night as he knelt beside his bunk to pray, the men swore at him and threw their boots at him. Not only did the men not like Doss, even though he had done nothing to them, but the Army just didn't know what to do with a soldier who wouldn't work on Saturday, who wouldn't carry a gun and didn't eat meat. At one point, his commanding officer tried to initiate a Section 8 (unfit for military service) discharge, but Doss vehemently

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fought the move, saying he really did want to serve his country; he just didn't want to kill. He remained in the Army, much to the great displeasure of most of his officers and fellow soldiers.

In July of 1944 on the island of Guam, Doss began to prove his courage and compassion for the very men who had taunted, belittled and threatened him. Next came Leyte in the Philippines during October of 1944. Here Doss braved enemy gunfire to go to the wounded and remove them to safety. Some of his company looked on in horror as they saw a Japanese sniper take aim at Doss as he helped a wounded soldier. They could do nothing to stop the sniper because other soldiers were in their line of fire. Miraculously, the sniper did not fire. Years later, a missionary in Japan said that a Japanese man attending one of his services told the missionary that the sniper could have been him. He remembered having a soldier in his sights, but he couldn't pull the trigger.

By now, his fellow soldiers were accustomed to seeing Doss read his Bible and praying, so it didn't seem unusual when, on the morning of April 29, 1945, he suggested that they might want to pray. They were facing a sheer 400-foot cliff that split the island of Okinawa known as the Maeda Escarpment. It would be necessary to attack and capture this area. The men of Company B bowed their heads as Doss offered a prayer for safety. Then they began to struggle up the face of the cliff. His unit captured the Maeda Escarpment in an incredible sweep in which not one man was killed and only one minor injury was sustained. When a photographer arrived and asked how they pulled it off, Doss' company commander answered, "Doss prayed!"

However, on May 5, the tide turned against the Americans as the Japanese launched a huge counterattack. Enemy fire raked Company B and almost immediately 75 men fell wounded. The remaining troops who were able to flee retreated back down to the base of the escarpment. Left at the top of the cliff were the wounded, the Japanese and Desmond T. Doss. For the next five hours, while his wounded comrades fought back their attackers, Doss began to lower man after man to safety down the face of the cliff using little more than a tree stump and a rope. Doss said he just kept praying that the Lord would let him rescue one more man. No one knows for sure how many men Doss lowered to safety that day. The Army determined that this medic, whom no one had wanted in the military, had personally saved 100 lives. Doss said it could not have been more than 50. Because of Doss' humble estimate, when the citation for his Medal of Honor was written, they split the difference and he was credited with saving the lives of 75 of his fellow soldiers.

On May 21, the Americans again were under fire while Doss remained in the open to help a wounded soldier. He and three other soldiers had crawled into a hole to wait for the cover of darkness to escape when a grenade was thrown in

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on them. The other three men jumped out to safety, but the grenade blew up just as Doss stepped on it. Somehow, he miraculously did not lose his leg, but sustained many wounds. He bandaged his own wounds and waited the five hours until daylight for help to arrive. As he was being carried off the field, they passed another critically wounded soldier. Doss rolled off the litter and told the medics to take the other man. He joined another wounded soldier and together they started to hobble off while supporting each other. Doss had his arm across the other man's neck when he felt a bullet slam into his arm. It shattered Doss' upper arm, which in turn saved the other man's life.

On October 12, 1945, Doss was invited to the White House to receive the Congressional Medal of Honor from President Harry S. Truman – the first non-combatant to ever receive the award. He would spend a total of six years in hospitals as a consequence of his wounds and a bout with tuberculosis.

At the funeral service Saturday, U.S. Representative Zach Wamp said Doss was to America what Mother Teresa was to the world. "We honor an ordinary man who made extraordinary contributions to this great nation," he said.

Yes, Desmond Doss' devotion to God and his country inspires us all. Future generations need to hear his story – and consider what a life given to serving people can mean.

--Beecher Hunter