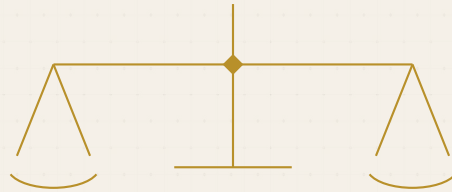


THE

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The Soldier Who Would Not Carry a Rifle

The True Story of Desmond Doss · Medal of Honor, Okinawa 1945

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The Soldier Who Would Not Carry a Rifle

The True Story of Desmond Doss · Medal of Honor, Okinawa 1945

The barracks at Fort Pickett, Virginia, were filled with the sharp, metallic scent of gun oil and the heavy silence of men who knew they were heading toward a world on fire. It was 1942. The smoke from Pearl Harbor had barely cleared, and every young man in the room was being forged into a weapon of the United States Army.

When the crates were opened and the M1 Garand rifles were handed out, the ritual was supposed to be simple. A soldier stepped forward, took the heavy wood-and-steel weight into his hands, and became part of a unified machine. But when the line reached Desmond Doss, the rhythm broke.

Doss stood still. His hands remained at his sides.

He did not reach for the rifle. He did not want the bayonet. He explained, in a soft Virginia drawl that lacked any hint of defiance, that he had volunteered to save lives, not take them. He was a Seventh-day Adventist, and his conscience — a compass he had followed since childhood — told him that he could not carry a weapon.

The drill sergeant's reaction was not one of understanding. In a world of total war, a soldier who refused to fight looked like a crack in the foundation of the building. To his officers, Doss was a paperwork nightmare; to his fellow recruits, he was something worse. They saw his refusal as a claim of moral superiority, or perhaps a clever mask for cowardice. They were preparing to face an enemy that had shown no mercy, and they didn't want to rely on a man who wouldn't fire back.

The Weight of the Silence

The pressure to break Doss began immediately. It wasn't just the shouting of officers; it was the quiet, grinding isolation of the barracks. While Doss knelt by his bunk to pray at night, boots were thrown at his head. Men called him "Holy Joe" or "The Preacher," their voices dripping with sarcasm. One soldier leaned over him and made a cold promise: "Doss, as soon as we get into combat, I'll make sure you don't come back."

The Army tried to discharge him under Section 8 — declaring him mentally unfit for service. Doss refused. He wasn't "unfit"; he was a patriot. He insisted he belonged in the 77th Infantry Division. He marched until his feet bled, he mastered the grueling obstacle courses, and he excelled in medical training. He did everything a soldier was asked to do, except touch a trigger.

Eventually, the Army gave up trying to court-martial him. They let him keep his medic's kit and his Bible, and they sent him to the Pacific.

The Edge of the World

By May 1945, the war had narrowed down to a jagged, blood-stained island called Okinawa. The Japanese defenders had spent years digging into the limestone, creating a labyrinth of caves and hidden bunkers. At the center of the American path was the Maeda Escarpment, a 400-foot vertical cliff the GIs called "Hacksaw Ridge."

To reach the top, the men had to climb massive cargo nets draped over the cliff face. When they crested the top, they weren't entering a battlefield; they were entering a kill zone.

On May 5, the 77th Division launched an assault that met a wall of mortar and machine-gun fire so intense it felt like the air itself was made of lead. Men were cut down as soon as their heads cleared the ridge. The order came to retreat — a desperate scramble back to the edge of the cliff to descend the nets and save what remained of the company.

As the able-bodied soldiers tumbled back down the cliff, they realized someone was missing. The medic had stayed at the top.

Desmond Doss was alone on the plateau. The ridge was a landscape of smoke and screams. Somewhere in the tall grass and behind the jagged rocks, dozens of wounded Americans lay bleeding, unable to move. The Japanese forces were beginning to move out of their caves to finish the job.

Doss had no rifle to cover his movement. He had no grenades to clear a path. He had only a length of rope and a belief that he could not leave his brothers behind.

The Rope and the Ridge

Doss crawled through the mud, moving toward the sound of the moans. He found a man with his legs shattered by shrapnel. Under a constant spray of bullets, Doss dragged the soldier back to the very edge of the 400-foot drop.

He had no way to carry the man down the cargo net. Thinking quickly, he devised a way to tie the rope into a double-loop sling — a "bowline on a bight." He looped it around the soldier's legs and chest and began lowering him down the face of the cliff to the stunned medics waiting below.

Then, Doss turned back toward the fire.

For hours, the men at the base of the cliff watched a miracle of physics and willpower. Every few minutes, the rope would slacken, then grow taut as a body was lowered slowly through the air. One man. Then another. Then a third.

The physical toll was staggering. Each man Doss saved required him to drag a dead weight across rough terrain, secure the knots, and hold the rope as it burned through his hands. Each time he finished, he whispered a private prayer: "Lord, please help me get one more."

At one point, he found a man he had been told was beyond help. He dragged him anyway. He found men from other companies who had been left for dead days earlier. He even treated wounded Japanese soldiers he encountered in the brush.

By the time Doss finally descended the ridge, he was covered in the blood of seventy-five men. He was exhausted, his hands were raw, and his uniform was shredded.

The Measured Man

A few days later, Doss was finally wounded. A grenade blast peppered his legs with shrapnel, and as he was being carried away on a stretcher, he saw another man who looked worse off. Doss rolled off the stretcher and told the carriers to take the other man instead. While waiting for them to return, a sniper's bullet shattered his arm. He used a broken rifle stock — the only time he ever truly "used" a weapon — to fashion a splint for himself and crawled 300 yards to the safety of an aid station.

When the battle for Okinawa finally ended, the men who had once thrown boots at Desmond Doss looked at him with a quiet, humbled awe. The man they had called a coward had stayed on the ridge when they had run. The man they thought would be a liability had become their lifeline.

In October 1945, Desmond Doss stood on the lawn of the White House. President Harry Truman took the Medal of Honor — the nation's highest award for valor — and hung it around the medic's neck.

"I'm proud of you," Truman said. "You really deserve this. I consider this a greater honor than being president."

Doss returned to Virginia, but he carried the physical scars of the ridge for the rest of his life. He lost a lung to tuberculosis contracted during the war and lived with permanent hearing loss. Yet, he never expressed regret. He had gone into the most violent theater of the twentieth century and emerged without ever having loaded a round. He had proven that while a rifle could win a battle, it took a different kind of strength to remain human in the middle of it.



Family Discussion Questions

1. AUTHORITY & CONSCIENCE

In the Army, soldiers are trained to obey orders. When Doss refused to pick up a rifle, was he disrespecting authority — or honoring a higher authority? How do you decide which authority matters most?

2. TWO KINDS OF COURAGE

It takes courage to run toward gunfire. It also takes courage to stand alone when everyone disagrees with you. Which kind of courage do you think was harder for Doss — refusing the rifle in training, or staying on the ridge in battle? Why?

3. TRUST IN THE TRENCHES

Imagine you were one of the soldiers in Doss's unit during training, knowing the country had just been attacked at Pearl Harbor. Would you have trusted him? What would have made that trust difficult?

4. DISOBEDIENCE OR DUTY?

The men on the ridge followed orders to retreat. Doss did not. Was that disobedience — or was it bravery and faithfulness to his duty? How can you tell the difference?

5. THE BIGGER PICTURE

If everyone in the Army had acted like Doss, could the United States have won the war? Why or why not?

6. COMPETING HONORS

Is it more honorable to protect life at any cost, or to defeat an enemy who threatens your nation? Can both be honorable at the same time?

7. REDEFINING THE WARRIOR

How could Doss's story change the way we define what a "warrior" is?