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The Real 'Hacksaw Ridge' Soldier Saved 75 Souls Without Ever Carrying A Gun

By Elizabeth Blair
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The United States entered World War II after the Japanese launched a surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, on December 7, 1941. Soon after, young men and women from around the country pledged to aid their nation. The Pacific Theatre was fought between the US and its allies against the Japanese, with most major battles taking place on small islands in the Pacific Ocean. The following text discusses Desmond Doss' contributions to the Battle of Okinawa as a conscientious objector: someone who objects to serving in the armed forces or bearing arms for reasons of conscience, such as religious or moral reasons. As you read, take notes on how people's attitude towards Doss changed over time.

- [1] Desmond Doss is credited with saving 75 soldiers during one of the bloodiest battles of World War II in the Pacific — and he did it without ever carrying a weapon. The battle at Hacksaw Ridge, on the island of Okinawa, was a close combat fight with heavy weaponry. Thousands of American and Japanese soldiers were killed, and the fact that Doss survived the battle *and* saved so many lives has confounded¹ and awed those who know his story. Now, he's the subject of a new film directed by Mel Gibson called *Hacksaw Ridge*.

A quiet, skinny kid from Lynchburg, Va., Doss was a Seventh-day Adventist who wouldn't touch a weapon or work on the Sabbath.² He enlisted in the Army as a combat medic³ because he believed in the cause, but had vowed not to kill. The Army wanted nothing to



"Desmond Doss CMH award" by US Federal Government is in the public domain.

1. **Confound** (*verb*) to confuse
2. a day of rest and worship observed by some Christians
3. A combat medic is a soldier responsible for providing emergency medical aid on the battlefield.

do with him. "He just didn't fit into the Army's model of what a good soldier would be," says Terry Benedict, who made a documentary about Doss called *The Conscientious Objector*.

The Army made Doss' life h— during training. "It started out as harassment and then it became abusive," Benedict says. He interviewed several World War II veterans who were in Doss' battalion.⁴ They considered him a pest, questioned his sincerity and threw shoes at him while he prayed. "They just saw him as a slacker," the filmmaker says, "someone who shouldn't have been allowed in the Army, and somebody who was their weakest link in the chain."

Doss' commanding officer, Capt. Jack Glover, tried to get him transferred. In the documentary, Glover says Doss told him, "Don't ever doubt my courage because I will be right by your side saving life while you take life." Glover's response: "You're not going to be by my damn side if you don't have a gun."

- [5] But hard as they tried, the Army couldn't force Doss to use a weapon. A 1940 law allowed conscientious objectors to serve the war effort in "noncombatant"⁵ positions, so Doss went with his company as a medic to the Pacific theater. And at Okinawa in the spring of 1945, Doss' company faced a grueling⁶ task: Climb a steep, jagged cliff — sometimes called Hacksaw Ridge — to a plateau where thousands of heavily armed Japanese soldiers were waiting for them. The terrain was treacherous.⁷ "It was full of caves and holes and the Japanese were dug in underground," says Mel Gibson, who re-created the battle in *Hacksaw Ridge*. " ... The Japanese called it 'the rain of steel' because there was so much iron flying around."

Under a barrage⁸ of gunfire and explosions, Doss crawled on the ground from wounded soldier to wounded soldier. He dragged severely injured men to the edge of the ridge, tied a rope around their bodies and lowered them down to other medics below. In Benedict's documentary, Doss says: "I was praying the whole time. I just kept praying, 'Lord, please help me get one more.'"

Veteran Carl Bentley, who was also at Hacksaw Ridge, says in the documentary, "It's as if God had his hand on [Doss'] shoulder. It's the only explanation I can give."

Doss saved 75 men — including his captain, Jack Glover — over a 12-hour period. The same soldiers who had shamed him now praised him. "He was one of the bravest persons alive," Glover says in the documentary. "And then to have him end up saving my life was the irony of the whole thing."

4. a large body of troops ready for battle
5. Noncombatant positions are roles in the military which are not directly responsible for attacking or targeting the enemy with weaponry, such as medics, nurses, engineers, etc.
6. **Grueling** (*adjective*) extremely tiring and demanding
7. **Treacherous** (*adjective*) hazardous or dangerous because of unknown or hidden dangers
8. a rapid outpouring of many things at once

President Harry Truman awarded Doss the Medal of Honor in 1945. He died in 2006.

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