

DESMOND DOSS

CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTOR



THE STORY OF AN UNLIKELY HERO

FRANCES M. DOSS



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The President of the United States
in the name of The Congress
takes pleasure in presenting the
Medal of Honor
to

DOSS, DESMOND T.

Rank and organization: Private First Class, U.S. Army, Medical Detachment, 307th Infantry, 77th Infantry Division. **Place and date:** Near Urasoe Mura, Okinawa, Ryukyu Islands, 29 April-21 May 1945. **Entered service at:** Lynchburg, Va. Birth: Lynchburg, Va. **G.O. No.:** 97, 1 November 1945.

Citation: 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. Pfc. Doss refused to seek cover and remained in the fire-swept area with the many stricken, carrying them 1 by 1 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 2 days later he treated 4 men who had been cut down while assaulting a strongly defended cave, advancing through a shower of grenades to within 8 yards of enemy forces in a cave's mouth, where he dressed his comrades' wounds before making 4 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 adminis-

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tered plasma. Later that day, when an American was severely wounded by fire from a cave, Pfc. 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 5 hours before litter bearers reached him and started carrying him to cover. The trio was caught in an enemy tank attack and Pfc. 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 1 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 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.

October 12, 1945
THE WHITE HOUSE

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Harry Truman", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

DESMOND'S FAVORITES

Bible text:

“Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths” (Proverbs 3:5, 6).

Salutation:

God bless you.

Sayings:

“Anything that’s not worth doing right to start with is not worth doing at all.”

“It’s not how much you know, but what you do with what you know.”



PREFACE

Dear Reader:

The reason I asked Frances, my godly wife, to write this book for me is that she knows more than anyone else about my God-given experiences and my desire to stick to the facts as much as possible.

My main interest is to encourage you, our readers, to choose to dedicate your lives to the Lord and be ready to meet Him at His soon return.

God wrote the Ten Commandments on tables of stone with His own finger. He said it was perfect and that nothing is to be added to it or taken away from it. We are to be judged by this law of liberty, so whether we accept or reject it is a matter of life or death.

Frances and I have dedicated our lives to Christ and have given Him first place in our hearts. As a result He has given us a greater love for each other than we ever thought possible, and we have never been happier.

Sincerely, your Christian brother in Christ,
Desmond T. Doss, CMH

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CHAPTER ONE

MEMORIES—I

The lone soldier was standing by the rail of the troop ship, looking out over the ocean. A beautiful half moon hung in the western sky, its silver trail shining across the water. The soldier was on a troop ship leaving Hawaii, where the 77th Infantry Division of the United States Army had been in jungle combat training. This was during World War II, and the soldiers on the ship knew they were heading west into the Pacific, but their destination was a secret—to them.

A few other soldiers wandered around on the dark deck—dark because a light could help enemy ships find them and send explosives in their direction. But in spite of the other men around him, Desmond felt quite alone up on the deck, and lonely, too. His thoughts went back to home and loved ones—his parents, his brother and sister, and his beautiful wife of two years. He missed Dorothy and remembered his last few moments with her before he had shipped out. When would he see her again? Would he see her again? The thought was so painful, he tried to turn his thoughts in another direction.

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“This is a nice picture. What am I bid?” the auctioneer asked as he picked up another picture from the stack. “What am I bid?” he repeated. “Ten cents. I have ten cents. Who will make it twenty cents? OK, Mr. Brown. Thank you. I have twenty. Anyone make it fifty cents? It’s worth much more—a beautiful picture. Fifty cents. Who will make it seventy-five?” He looked around. “There, I have seventy-five. Now, how about

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eighty cents?” He waited a few seconds before crying out, “Seventy-five, seventy-five, seventy-five. Anyone eighty? No? Going, going, gone at seventy-five cents to that man right over there.”

“Oh, Mr. Doss. You’ve got yourself a bargain, Mr. Doss.”

Mr. Thomas Doss took the picture in his hands, looked at it, and wondered why he had bid on an illustration of the Lord’s Prayer and the Ten Commandments. He had to admit it was a very nice picture, but why did he want it?

“Oh, well,” he muttered to himself, “Bertha will probably like it to hang on the wall in the living room.” He had come to the auction to find furniture and other items for his new home. Thomas and Bertha hadn’t been married long, and they were trying to furnish their small home without spending too much money.

Of course, this event had happened a number of years before Desmond Doss was born, but he had heard it many times. Besides, that picture was hanging on the living room wall at the little house on Easley Avenue right now. From the time he was a small boy, Desmond had looked at the picture many times. In fact, Mother Doss sometimes wished he weren’t quite so interested in the picture—not because she didn’t want him to look at it, but because he was always dragging a kitchen chair into the living room to stand on so that he could see the picture better.

One time she told him, “Desmond, please take the chair back to the kitchen, won’t you? I declare, that chair seat is getting worn out, you stand on it so much.” But Desmond could tell she wasn’t really unhappy with him.

Standing on deck of a troop ship out on the Pacific Ocean and thinking about his life since childhood, he realized once again how much that picture had influenced his life. The sixth commandment, “Thou shalt not kill,” was illustrated by a picture of Cain, with a club in his hands, standing over the dead body of his brother, Abel, just after killing him. Desmond often wondered, *How could a brother do such a thing?* It gave him such a horror of killing anybody or anything; he was sure the picture had made him decide to be a medical soldier who would save life instead of taking it. He could imagine Jesus saying to him, “Desmond, if you love Me, you will not kill, but save life as I would if I were in your place. Follow My example.”

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His thoughts rambled on. Mother, bless her heart, always took her three children to Sabbath School and church services. First, she pushed Audrey to church in the baby carriage; later as Audrey walked beside her mother, Desmond occupied the baby carriage. Still later, Harold would ride in the carriage while the two other children skipped happily beside their mother.

“Desmond! Harold! It’s time to study our Sabbath School lesson.” Audrey already had her small Bible, ready to open it, and the boys soon joined her and Mother. It became a habit with them. Desmond recalled that when he was drafted into the army, he had just received his eight-year ribbon from the Sabbath School for attending each week, being on time, and studying his lesson seven times—once each day throughout the week.

Another memory was of attending the little church school in the back of the church on Park Avenue. Each pupil at the church school acted as a janitor. The teacher assigned various cleanup jobs to each student, changing the jobs from time to time so the children wouldn’t be bored. Desmond well remembered one job he was told to do. He was to clean the blackboards and dust the erasers.

Now, that blackboard is OK, he thought to himself. *I’ll take these erasers out and dust them, and then I can go home.* Then an idea popped into his head. He knew enough about erasers to know that if you rub them together, they will look clean—and you don’t make all that dust that sticks in your throat and makes you cough. Besides, it would take less time. So Desmond rubbed the erasers together, took them back inside, and set them up on the blackboard—looking all clean, but filled with chalk dust.

The wise teacher, Nell Ketterman, came over to the blackboard just as Desmond set the erasers down. She picked up two and banged them together. You know what happened—the dust FLEW! Then she made a remark that Desmond had never forgotten. “Desmond, anything that’s not worth doing right to start with isn’t worth doing at all.”

Desmond went out and dusted the erasers again—properly, this time. But what she said had stuck with him all his life. How many times that saying had come back to him as he grew up and after he was in the army. And how many times he had determined to do the job right the first time.

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Shortly after that, Nell Ketterman had gone to China as a missionary. As Desmond was growing up, he thought he would like to be a missionary to some far-off place, just like his favorite teacher. He didn't realize it right then on that troop ship, but he would have a chance to be a missionary to people on the islands he was going to—at Uncle Sam's expense—because he would sometimes take care of the native islanders as well as the soldiers.

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His next thought was of how God had taken care of him. Desmond seemed to be accident prone, and his mother wondered at times how he ever lived to grow up. To tell the truth, from his vantage point of twenty-five years of age, he sometimes wondered the same thing himself.

“Desmond, I need some milk or we won't have any for breakfast,” said Mother Doss. “Run over to Aunt Ella's and get us a quart, will you?”

Aunt Ella grew a garden and also had a cow, and she very generously shared produce and milk with her relatives during this depression time. That was the reason Desmond was to go to Aunt Ella's for milk.

He could almost remember the conversation that usually went on between him and his aunt.

“Will one quart be enough, Desmond?” she would ask.

“That is all Mom said to get,” Desmond would reply.

“All right.” And Aunt Ella would pour the milk into the quart milk bottle that Desmond had brought. This was when milk came in glass bottles, not the plastic containers we see today.

“Thanks, Aunt Ella,” and Desmond would be on his way, after promising to tell his mother hello for Aunt Ella.

But on this day Desmond never arrived at his aunt's house. He had to cross a cobblestone street on the way—better than mud but very bumpy. His foot tripped on one of the stones, and he fell. He didn't want to break the empty milk bottle he was carrying, so he tried to hold it up as he fell. It didn't work. The bottle broke!

He screamed as he fell, and neighbors heard him and came out to see who was hurt. Then someone ran to tell his mother. Mother, running out the door and down the sidewalk, found Desmond lying in the street.

“Desmond, honey, what have you done to yourself?” It took her only seconds to realize that his left hand was badly cut. She ran back into the

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house and got a large towel to wrap his hand in. One of the neighbors offered the use of his car to take Desmond to the Lynchburg hospital, to what we would now call the emergency room.

The doctor worked hard on the hand and then stitched it up. “Mrs. Doss, I’ve done the best I can, but I’m afraid your boy will never be able to use that hand again. With that tendon and those muscles being cut . . .” He didn’t finish the sentence.

So Desmond was taken home with that dire prediction hanging over his head, and also over the head of his loving, but sad, mother. She couldn’t stand to do nothing about it, so as soon as Desmond’s hand began to heal and wasn’t too sore to touch, she started working his fingers up and down, back and forth—stretching them out as far as they would go.

“Ow, Mom, that hurts!”

“Yes, son, I know, but we want to give that hand every chance to heal. See if you can move those fingers yourself when I’m not around to do it for you. And, Desmond, let’s pray that God will heal your hand, shall we?” They had already prayed about it, but now they prayed even more earnestly.

“Mom, come here. I want to show you something,” Desmond called to his mother as she came in the door a few days later from her work at the shoe factory.

“Yes, Desmond, what is it?” When Mother reached him, he held up his left hand—and wiggled the second finger.

“Desmond, how wonderful! You can move it!” exclaimed Mother. There was no doubt about her joy and happiness at this wonderful turn of events. “Let’s say a little prayer right now and thank God for helping your hand.” Desmond bowed his head as his mother thanked God for this wonderful blessing. His hand did heal, and although it didn’t look quite the same as his right hand, he could use it, and he was glad.

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As he stood on the deck that night, Desmond thought of another experience when God had blessed him in a very special way.

He had been out playing with the neighborhood children. They were running back and forth on the top of a rock wall. Desmond slipped and

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skinned his knee on the side of the rock wall as he fell. He remembered how it hurt. “I’m heading for home,” he told the others.

“Oh, it hurts,” he said to himself when he looked at it that night. But it would heal, and he didn’t want to worry his mother over a little thing like a skinned knee. He tried to keep from limping and managed to hide the hurt from his family—for a couple of days, that is. On the third morning, he couldn’t make himself get out of bed.

Mother had to go to work at the shoe factory, and she always left early. A neighbor lady, whom the children called Aunt Jenny, would come in, get the children up, give them their breakfast, and then see that they got off to school. That particular morning, she told Desmond it was time to get up, but noticed a few minutes later that he was still in bed. So she went to investigate.

She found him groaning and holding his knee. Even as inexperienced as she was medically, she could tell when she looked at his knee that he was in bad shape. The knee was red and hot, and ugly red streaks radiated from the bruise, indicating blood poisoning. This neighbor called Mother Doss at the shoe factory and told her to come home, explaining a little bit about Desmond’s knee.

“Desmond, why didn’t you tell me?” Mother asked when she had looked at the knee herself.

“I thought it would heal up and be OK; I didn’t want to worry you.” Mother thought to herself that it would have been better to have worried her a couple of days earlier than waiting until now, but she didn’t remind Desmond of that right then.

Of course, the doctor came. After examining the knee carefully, he told the parents, for Father had arrived by that time, “I hate to tell you this, but you can see his knee is badly infected, and I can see nothing to do except to amputate the leg. The poison from the infection is getting into his body and could kill him.”

Kill him! What a thought! But how could they allow the doctor to cut off one of Desmond’s legs! No! No! Have Desmond get around with just one leg? That would be terrible. But if they didn’t and Desmond died? What a decision to make!

“Doctor, isn’t there anything we can do?” asked Mother Doss desperately. The doctor suggested it might help if she put a hot pack on the knee.

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“It won’t hurt to try, Mrs. Doss, but you will have to do it at least every two hours, and I wonder if it will help. Try it, but if it isn’t somewhat better by tomorrow, the leg will have to come off,” replied the doctor as he left.

Mother put a large pan of hot water on the stove and kept it hot. Then she wrung out a big towel and put it around Desmond’s knee, then covered it with a heavy folded towel to keep the heat in. She changed the towel to a new, hot one often.

Of course, as she was doing this, she was also praying that God would bless her efforts and save Desmond’s leg. After putting the hot packs on his knee for the rest of that day and then all night long, Mother Doss was exhausted, but she would not give up.

“Mom, it doesn’t hurt as much as it did,” Desmond remarked during the night. As his mother carefully examined the knee again, she felt it didn’t look quite as bad, either. The red streaks seemed to be fading away. With tears of gratitude in her eyes, she thanked the Lord, continued to pray—and kept changing hot packs.

When the doctor came the next day, he examined the knee again. “Mrs. Doss, I really think you’re winning the battle. We’ll watch the knee very carefully for the next couple of days, but it seems to be better.” Welcome words! The whole family rejoiced but none more than Desmond.

He remembered one other thing about that experience. After lying in bed for several days and getting all those treatments and knowing his leg was better, he decided he wanted to get up, so he sat on the edge of the bed, put his feet down, stood up—and sprawled on the floor! He found he had to get his strength back and almost learn to walk all over again.

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He remembered yet one other time as he stood on the ship’s deck that night, leaning on the rail. This time the memory didn’t revolve around himself.

Desmond’s brother, Harold, was sick—very sick. His temperature was up to 103 degrees, and he was in a lot of pain. Mother had done all she knew to do for him, but it didn’t seem to help. He was still hot and groaning in pain. The doctor had come, but he was at a loss to know what to do for Harold.

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“Mrs. Doss, I wonder if he will live through the night. If he does, I’ll bring another doctor with me tomorrow morning, and we’ll take a spinal tap to see if we can decide where the problem is and whether we can help him.” The doctor’s words weren’t very comforting.

“Desmond, I believe we should pray for Harold, don’t you?” Mother Doss said to her older son.

“Yes, Mom, I think we should. Will Jesus make Harold well?” asked Desmond.

“We don’t know for sure, honey. We always want to ask that God’s will be done. But we can always ask.” So mother and son knelt beside the sick boy’s bed, and Mother prayed, “Dear Father in heaven, You know that Harold is very sick, and You know he is in a lot of pain. Would You please bring healing to his body if that can be according to Your will? But if You see that it is best not to heal him . . .” Her voice broke with a sob at this point, “then please bring the end soon so that he will not have to suffer so much. Thank You, Lord. Amen.”

As Mother and Desmond rose from their knees, they glanced at Harold. They suddenly realized he was not breathing as hard as he had been. The thought came to them that he was dying, but NO! He was breathing quietly, and the color was coming back into his pale face. Soon he fell into a peaceful sleep and woke up the next morning feeling very good. How could Desmond ever forget that experience!

The doctor came the next morning as he promised and was very much surprised to see Harold doing so well. Mother just had to tell the doctor about her prayer and how Harold had improved right away.

“Son,” he said to Harold, “the Lord has saved your life, and I trust it is for a good purpose.”

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I’m getting tired. Think I will turn in and get some shut-eye, Desmond thought as he made his way to his bunk. Soon he was asleep.