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REVISITING DESMOND DOSS (1919–2006): MERGING COMBAT MEDICINE AND BENEVOLENCE ON THE BATTLEFIELD

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☐ **Abstract—Conscientious objectors are typically defined only by their unwillingness to serve in the armed forces. Desmond Doss participated in World War II as a combat medic and a conscientious objector by providing emergency medicine on active battlefields while refusing to handle a weapon or harm another human being. Born and raised with humility, Doss developed spiritually as a Seventh Day Adventist. Although fixated on the Ten Commandments and "Thou shall not kill," Doss felt a call to serve and voluntarily enlisted in the U.S. Army with aspirations of becoming a combat medic. Throughout his training he was met with physical, spiritual, and political obstacles as his superiors unsuccessfully tried to convince him and eventually to force him out of the military or to take up arms and fight. Doss was granted his request as a combat medic, was not required to handle a weapon or fight, and was deployed with the 307th Infantry Regiment overseas. His heroism on the battlefield saved hundreds of lives and earned him the Medal of Honor. A thorough yet concise examination of Doss' formative years, the obstacles presented by the country he aimed to serve, how he evolved from a conscientious objector to a combat medic worthy of emulation, and his lasting legacy is a necessary reminder of what we risk when courageous people are limited by outdated and potentially unconstitutional policies and perceptions.** © **2018 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.**

☐ **Keywords—Desmond Doss; conscientious objector; combat medicine; World War II**

INTRODUCTION

Conscientious objectors to war have been part of the fabric of American society since its foundation. Men who refused military service or served yet refused to take a life based on religious or ethical reasons have often been stigmatized by society, imprisoned, or were forced into civilian or military service (1–5). Beginning with World War II, new military programs such as the American Medical Cadet Corps offered training to young men who came from religious backgrounds that forbade them from taking up arms. With these changes in place, young men could now actively contribute to wartime efforts without having to handle weapons or kill others, thus the young men became "conscientious cooperators" rather than "conscientious objectors" (6–8). Corporal Desmond Doss (Figure 1) was the first conscientious cooperator to receive the Medal of Honor for his bravery in practicing his faith and risking his life time and again to save wounded soldiers during his service as a medic for the 307th Infantry Regiment (9–11).

Corporal Desmond Doss, United States Army Medical Corps during World War II, was an anomaly, and in the view of many today, an anachronism. The anomaly is twofold: Doss was a man of deep religious conviction who refused to consider harming another human being

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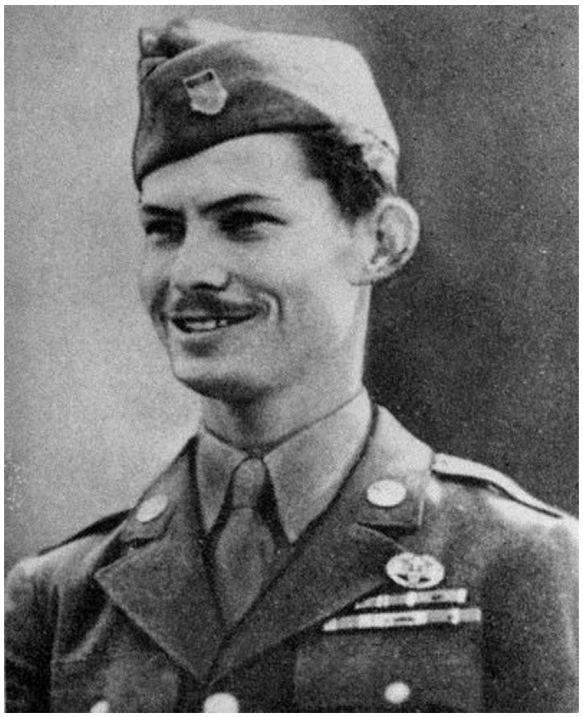

Figure 1. United States Army combat medic–Desmond Doss (1945). U.S. Army Medical Department, Office of Medical History.

due to the commandment not to kill (Exodus 20:13), yet was willing to endure combat to save lives. Doss's foundation was his religion and desire to serve others. Desmond Doss' ability to think through these differences and develop a consistent worldview that allowed him to live honorably in both halves of that anomaly is most remarkable and admirable. Certainly, the Seventh Day Adventist Church, of which he was a lifelong member, considers him a hero of the faith. The United States Army and all the soldiers Doss saved on the battlefield knew he was a hero. All Americans ought to consider his heroism: a citizen soldier who put aside civilian comforts to serve his fellow man, his comrades, and the nation in time of war. A major motion picture such as *Hacksaw Ridge*, and the requisite book, can sometimes light a fire of interest in American heroes. Doss was, and remains, a hero in a long and proud line of American heroes, a personage worthy of esteem and emulation. This article offers a concise narrative review of Doss' life, including his personal and spiritual development, his service during World War II, and his legacy as a conscientious objector and combat medic. This article necessarily follows *Hacksaw Ridge* to provide a thorough and in-depth look into Doss, his military career, the values that led to his character development prior to and during the war, and the legacy that endured. Medical professionals could benefit from the cultural and spiritual reflections and the compassion that can result from understanding aspects of medical humanities. These virtues are not often overtly present in medical provider curricula, training, and practice, yet do surface in works of fiction and nonfiction. This article represents a brief attempt to fill these gaps by presenting Desmond Doss and his story in this professional journal.

DESMOND DOSS–HIS EARLY LIFE

Desmond Doss was born February 7, 1919 in rural Lynchburg, Virginia. He was the second son of William Thomas Doss and Bertha Edward Oliver Doss. Theirs was a simple working-class family—his father was a carpenter and his mother a shoemaker. The single most important factor influencing Doss during his formative years was his upbringing as a strict Seventh Day Adventist (10). His parents immersed him in a devout faith-based environment, emphasizing honest and selfless living, which became the focus of his altruistic worldview. Doss grew up wanting to be either a doctor or a missionary. Academically this did not work out for him, as he completed only 1 year of high school prior to getting a job as a ship joiner in Newport News, Virginia (12).

As a young boy, Doss developed a deep reverence for the Ten Commandants, but most especially the Sixth Commandment: "Thou shall not kill." Stories conflict as to whether the lithograph poster, vividly depicting an angry Cain standing over his slain brother Abel, was in the family home or a gift from his father hanging in Doss's room. Either way, that image made a profound impression on Doss and he swore that he would never, under any circumstance, take another man's life (3). This was a vow that Doss would keep despite ridicule, harassment, conflict, and extreme danger to himself. Growing up surrounded by like-minded people, Doss was free to practice his religion, be active in his church community, and ultimately, become a deacon at age 21 years (10).

Eventually, war came to America and Doss found himself in a job that was vital to the defense of the nation and critical to America's efforts to exact revenge upon Japan: ship building. He easily could have avoided military service through deferment due to his trade, but that was not consistent with Doss's values. Doss was a patriot who wanted to serve his country and not shirk his duty. However, he wanted to serve his country and his fellow man in a way consistent with his religious beliefs. He desired to serve as a noncombatant in the medical field, helping to preserve life and ease suffering caused by the war. When Doss became a ship joiner in 1941 he was required to register for the draft, and despite some misgivings, he chose to file as a conscientious objector, called 1-A-O status by the Army. Telzrow explains Doss' concern that such a label placed him in the company of men he believed were shirkers, seditionists, and unpatriotic (10). In the end he registered anyway, preferring to call himself a "conscientious cooperator," and specifically

requested duty in the medical corps. This he eventually received, but it would take much pain, hard work, and convincing others of his worth before Doss could do what he felt called to do in service of his country. In 1942 he was called up and shipped off for initial training, but not prior to marrying Dorothy Pauline Schutte, who would follow him around the country during training before he finally shipped overseas (13).

MILITARY TRAINING

From almost his first day in the Army, Desmond Doss was misunderstood, ridiculed, harassed, intimidated, and almost thrown out of the service due to his religious beliefs and practices. The social upheaval in America caused by World War II was profound. Citizens from all parts of the country and extremely varied backgrounds were thrown together and forged through a crucible of hard training and discipline to mold them into fighting units. Doss stood out against his secular fellow soldiers who did not understand his strict religious convictions against drinking, smoking, gambling, swearing, or fornicating. They did not partake in his habits of regular Bible reading and church attendance. In fact, most of these things made the other soldiers ridicule him and label him as *soft*. Doss's repeated requests for passes to attend church on Saturday, the Sabbath observed by the Seventh Day Adventist Church, caused much friction among his platoon mates as well as his chain of command. In the Army, other soldiers trained and received guard duty on Saturday and they were not pleased to see Doss get a pass. These soldiers did not know Doss had convinced his leaders that he would gladly work or pull guard duty on Sunday, when the other soldiers were away on pass; they only knew they did not see him working on Saturday. Further, his commanders were frustrated with having to deal with this issue every weekend and were very resentful whenever Doss went "over their heads" to higher commanders to get a pass when they refused to grant one. Added to this, Doss refused to train with weapons or even touch a firearm. Doss would receive various work details around the rifle range but never touch a weapon. This further separated him from his fellow soldiers and aggravated his standing with his superiors (13,14).

Eventually Doss was brought before a board of officers to consider discharging him from service for psychological reasons, essentially because he did not "fit in." It is interesting to note that even Doss knew the questionable character and poor service performance of other conscientious objectors, which worked against him, yet Doss eschewed such behavior. He had been a model soldier in all respects save for not touching a weapon. He was a hard worker, learned his medical trade, was alert in class, offered assistance to others, and kept his personal appearance, area, and equipment in fine shape. He willingly requested extra duty on Sundays and obeyed orders. In his own defense, Doss fought against separation and convinced the commander to admit that his overall performance was exemplary. In the end, Doss argued that the only apparent reason he was being separated was his religious beliefs, which were guaranteed by the same Constitution that he swore an oath to defend. Taking those two points into consideration, plus Doss' determination to succeed against opposition and willingness to serve in combat, the military board relented and dropped all charges. Still, the medical officers had seen enough of Doss and had him transferred to the 307th Infantry Regiment of the 77th Infantry Division, where he served the remainder of his service time as a medic (12–14).

His medical training can be best described as advanced first aid as it applies to the battlefield. He received this training as part of the medical detachment of the 77th Infantry Division at Fort Jackson, South Carolina. Each medic was issued two canvas first aid bags and learned how to use the contents of each bag. Topics included battlefield dressings, sulfanilamide powder, and morphine syrettes. Other training included making field-expedient splints (using rifle stocks and branches), administering plasma, and knowing when to allow patients to drink water. Although when compared with modern military medical training, what Doss received seems rudimentary, he did make expedient use of everything he learned during his brief medical training on the battlefield (13,14).

Upon arriving to the new unit, one of three medics so assigned, Desmond Doss soon made his mark and gained the lasting admiration of the infantrymen. Right after arrival, his unit went on a 25-mile forced march—25 miles in 8 h with full gear—an exhausting exercise for any experienced infantryman. Doss also carried his medical bag, knowing it would be needed. During the entire march Doss was busy caring for the feet of his soldiers (as he considered these men to be). During halts or whenever a soldier fell out of formation, Doss was there checking, lancing, bandaging, and pushing them to catch up. Doss completed the march with the unit and without any physical problems of his own, and that night rechecked his platoon's condition (13,14). This deep abiding concern for his fellow soldiers and selfless service helped his platoon mates see Doss in a new light and accept him as one of their own.

MILITARY SERVICE AND COMBAT

The 307th Infantry Regiments' accomplishments and the horrors of war they experienced across many Pacific island battlefields are truly astounding. Woven into that record are the many, almost unbelievably heroic actions of Desmond Doss. In the 2016 movie *Hacksaw Ridge*, the

emphasis was on the fight for the Maeda Escarpment on Okinawa, but the foundations for Doss' actions there were laid long before. First, Doss often volunteered to stand watch and to go on dangerous patrols while himself unarmed. Here Doss disregarded the edict to observe the Sabbath only by church attendance, convinced that because Jesus healed on the Sabbath, he could do the same for his men (10). But still he would not touch a weapon or take a life. In one instance at an outpost near a spider hole, Doss heard Japanese soldiers tunneling beneath. Doss had hand grenades nearby but could not bring himself to use them. Attempting unsuccessfully to wake a fellow soldier, Doss chose to wait until the voices passed by. No one can know for sure what would have happened if the enemy attacked out of that hole.

Eventually, Doss experienced serious combat. His unit fought to regain Guam from July 21 to August 10, 1944. He went forward with various units in the intense heat and repeatedly removed wounded soldiers from the battlefield, often while under fire. At Leyte in December of that year, Doss crossed an open field under intense fire to retrieve two wounded soldiers. One was dead, so Doss evacuated the remaining wounded man, constructing a stretcher out of bamboo. Doss later received the Bronze star medal with oak leaf cluster in acknowledgement of these two actions. Years later Doss would say, "I knew these men; they were my buddies, some had wives and children. If they were hurt, I wanted to be there to take care of them" [(10), p.36]. This attitude and the decisive actions that accompanied them earned Doss the admiration and eternal gratitude of his fellow soldiers. Every infantryman learns to love and protect his platoon medic because they know he will risk everything to save lives; an illustration of medical mutualistic care.

In late April 1945, the 307th landed on Okinawa to participate in the last major amphibious operation of the war, and certainly, one of the costliest. On April 29, they fought their way to the top of Maeda Escarpment, a steep 400-yard-high hill only 75–100 yards wide at the top and sloping sharply down the backside. The last 35 yards on the front slope was a sheer cliff with a 5-yard overhang. On the night of April 30, on the order of his platoon leader, Doss and several other men rigged from the hilltop a cargo net, such as those used to climb on and off ships, to allow the soldiers to climb straight up (15). The Japanese were dug into the mountain on the reverse slope and fought hard to retain it, just as they had done throughout the war. From May 1st until the 4th, the 307th repeatedly climbed the escarpment to capture the entire mountain, and Desmond Doss was a busy man throughout this battle. On May 2 he exposed himself to heavy rifle and mortar fire to rescue a soldier laying 200 yards in front of friendly lines. On May 4 he crawled perilously close to an enemy fighting position and, disregarding hand grenades thrown at him, treated and recovered four wounded men, one at a time in separate trips (16). Later that day came the event that defined Doss' valor on the battlefield and earned him the Medal of Honor. Men of the 1st battalion attacked and destroyed an enemy bunker complex, but a furious Japanese barrage and counterattack drove this unit back over the escarpment with heavy losses. For the next 5 h, Doss remained forward of the lines to locate, care for, and individually evacuate 75 wounded Americans. Using available ropes and a litter technique that he had devised back in training, Doss fashioned a sling that secured each man's legs through loops and doubled around the chest. This worked perfectly and ensured that lowering the wounded over the jagged cliff would not result in any additional injuries (10). Throughout this ordeal, Doss repeatedly exposed himself to heavy enemy fire and sometimes hid himself from Japanese soldiers sent to kill the wounded. The next day, Doss braved enemy artillery fire to aid an American artillery officer who had been wounded; and even later crawled to within 25 yards of an enemy cave to treat and recover a wounded soldier, pulling him back 100 yards to safety despite continuous enemy fire (16).

The magnitude of Doss' accomplishments during this 5-day period is staggering from a military point of view and incomprehensible to those who have never seen combat. Doss was not finished until 2 weeks later when luck finally ran out for one who had taken so many risks. On May 21 he was seriously wounded in the legs and left by his comrades in enemy territory during an attack near the town of Shuri. Rather than risk being misidentified as a Japanese infiltrator if he attempted withdrawal, and not wanting to risk another medic's life to rescue him, Doss treated his own wounds and waited. About 5 h later a litter team came to evacuate him; however, upon seeing another soldier wounded more seriously, Doss got off the litter and told the other medics to treat that man instead. Again, awaiting evacuation, Doss was wounded in the arm by a sniper. Fashioning the broken stock of a rifle into a splint, Doss then crawled 300 yards to an aid station (16). He later recalled that that was the first and only time he had ever touched a rifle. World War II had finally come to an end for Desmond Doss and he was flown back to the United States for medical treatment. This would not be the end of Doss' medical problems, as his wounds were serious enough to prevent him from regular employment. In addition to his wounds he had contracted tuberculosis and would spend the next 5 years recuperating under a doctor's care (17).

DESMOND DOSS–POSTWAR AND HIS LEGACY

Desmond Doss became the first noncombatant conscientious objector to receive the Medal of Honor in a White

House ceremony on October 12, 1945. President Harry Truman took special note of this young man who upheld his personal religious beliefs while living up to his patriotic values in service to his country and fellow man. As Senator Max Cleland recalls, in addition to Doss' Medal of Honor, he also received two Bronze Star medals, three Purple Hearts, the Asiatic-Pacific Campaign ribbon with three stars, and one Beachhead Arrowhead (for landing ashore under fire), as well as the Presidential Unit Citation (as a member of the 1/307 Inf [77ID] during the battle for Maeda Escarpment) (15). By any standard, that is a significant collection even without the Medal of Honor. Statistically, 6% of all valor awards in the Army and the Navy went to medical department personnel. Nine of the Medals of Honor awarded during World War II went to medics and corpsmen (18). Not mentioned in Krieghbaum's book was Dr. Benjamin Lewis Salomon (1914–1944), an Army dentist who posthumously received the Medal of Honor in 2002 for his actions in Saipan in 1944 (18). Salomon was not a conscientious objector and he did not hesitate to take up arms and die covering the evacuation of his patients, allowing all to escape safely from a forward aid station. His contribution makes 10 Medals of Honor awarded to medical personnel in World War II.

Desmond Doss continued to serve his fellow man and to practice his faith until March 23, 2006, the day he died. He served in his church and organized a youth group to develop young boys into men of character. Whenever he would display his military medals he would say that he had received from his service something far more important than a medal. He would tell them that when your fellow soldier says they owe their life to you, what better reward is there (17)? Boys from the youth organization Doss founded walked in his funeral procession wearing their uniforms. Many others have been inspired by the life of Desmond Doss. He is repeatedly held up by the Seventh Day Adventist Church as a hero to the church as well as to America (19). Three years prior to the 2016 release of the movie *Hacksaw Ridge,* the Desmond Doss Council undertook a project to update and republish his original authoritative biography. Among the editors was Kareis Darling Wagner, who energetically came out of retirement to work on this project. The result became the foundation for the highly successful movie for all to see and an in-print book for a new generation of admirers to read, continuing the legacy of Desmond Doss (14,19).

CONCLUSIONS

The history of the combat medic dates back over 2000 years to Roman's use of the *Capsarii*, or bandagers, who experienced war alongside their armed countrymen (20). The story of Desmond Doss is inspiring, uplifting, entertaining, and endures as a living history of courage and faith. We are reminded that heroes are not born, they are made through hard work, sacrifice, and adversity. Many perceive adversity as physical, mental, or emotional, and although Doss experienced all of these prior to and during the war, his most and least difficult obstacles were spiritual. Doss's story contains lessons for everyone across all walks of life. The military can see the result of acceptance and understanding, the medical profession should honor bravery and courage, and the citizen must recognize that extraordinary heroism can be found in the most unlikely places. Doss's experiences, and the stories told about him by those he served, and most importantly, the experiences lived by those he saved on the battlefield, should be remembered, revered, taught, and shared as an example of how principles of faith and duty can and should co-exist.

Marginalization of the individual based on constitutionally protected choices, such as conscientious objectors, can and should be discussed at the policy level within our armed forces. The story of Desmond Doss is just one example of why regular re-evaluation of military screening processes, enlistment procedures, and field training require periodic re-evaluation. The criteria for enlistment in the military often include vague and potentially exclusionary language such as *unfitness*, *unsuitability*, and *misconduct*. One potential avenue to address these ambiguously defined clauses would be a renewed focus on merit and a reduced focus on potentially unconstitutional disqualifiers similar to the rationale used with Doss. What was once stigmatized and marginalized as cowardice should serve as a model for institutionalized misunderstanding built into our code of conduct. Although the current literature supports broad use of, and support for, the profession of combat medic, the person who aspires to become that medic can still face unwritten obstacles and disqualifiers similar to Desmond Doss (21,22). Should constitutionally protected choices such as religious affiliation, gender identity, sexual orientation, or pacifism adversely affect a person's desire and passion to serve their country? Should disqualifying language in our military enlistment code overshadow or supplant meritorious inclusion? These are questions Doss might ask us to consider if he were asked today.

Governing bodies for medical fields and each branch of the military must recognize the ethical precedent set by Desmond Doss prior to and during his World War II campaign. His principled opposition to violence, previously considered an act of self-preservation, cowardice, or attempted desertion, has and must continue to be a standard and a baseline for current and future generations of American's willing to serve in the military. A person's faith should not be used as a predictor of their character, their courage, their sense of honor and duty, or their value. Doss was initially judged as a man using only his spiritual

convictions, and he had to fight to remain in service to a military and a country that sought to remove him.

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