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Healing Seven Days a Week – Okinawa, Japan, 1945

Desmond Doss quit school after the eighth grade in the middle of the Depression to help support his family. He was working in the shipyards in Newport News, Virginia, when he was drafted into the Army in April 1942. He wanted to serve his country, but as a devout Seventh Day Adventist, he chose not to bear arms, so he joined the Army's Medical Corps. In basic training, the other recruits considered him strange because of his deep religious convictions—so much so that they threatened and harassed him and tried to get him transferred out of the unit. Doss successfully fought efforts to discharge him.

Private Doss served as a medic with the 77th Division in campaigns on Guam and Leyte in 1944, where the lingering suspicions the other men had about him were dispelled by his bravery under fire. On Okinawa, in the late spring of 1945, his battalion was assaulting a jagged escarpment rising four hundred feet whose summit was commanded by well-entrenched Japanese forces. It was a battle that began on April 29 when the American took the position and continued on for nearly three weeks as the Japanese fought back from caves and tunnels. At one point, he treated four men who had been cut down while assaulting a strongly defended cave. Only a few yards away from Japanese guns, he dressed each of their wounds and made four trips to drag them to safety.

On May 5, a Saturday and Doss's Sabbath, he was the only medic available as the ongoing assault on the escarpment met heavy resistance. Telling himself that Christ had healed seven days a week, he advanced with the rest of the men. They seemed on the verge of finally taking the position when the enemy concentrated massive artillery, mortar, and machine-gun fire on them, driving most of them back down the face of the escarpment and leaving dozens of casualties behind.

Doss alone stayed with the fallen soldiers. Under constant fire, he tended the wounded, then dragged them to the edge of the escarpment and lowered them down in a rope sling. Each time he got one of them to safety, he prayed, "Dear God, let me get just one more man." By nightfall, he had rescued seventy-five GIs.

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Desmond T. Doss

*Private First Class, U.S. Army
Medical Detachment, 307th Infantry
77th Infantry Division*

BORN: February 1, 1919
Lynchburg, Virginia

ENTERED SERVICE:
Lynchburg, Virginia

DUTY: World War II

DIED: March 20, 2006





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Several days later, after American forces were advancing slowly against strong resistance, Doss was seriously wounded in the leg by a grenade. He treated himself, then waited five hours to be rescued. As he was being carried back to an aid station on a stretcher, the enemy counterattacked. Along the way, Doss insisted on giving his stretcher to a badly injured GI.

Another soldier who was slightly wounded came along and suggested to Doss that the two of them try to reach the aid station together. As they were making their way, a sniper's bullet struck Doss in the arm, entering at his wrist and traveling to his upper arm. He improvised a splint out of a rifle stock, and he and the other wounded man eventually made it to the aid station.

In the meantime, the litter bearers had returned for Doss. When they couldn't find him, they assumed he was dead. The news made the front page of his hometown paper in Lynchburg, Virginia. Doss, now at a field hospital, had a nurse help him write a letter to his mother to let her know that reports of his death had been greatly exaggerated.

The bullet in Doss's arm was removed at the Woodrow Wilson Hospital in Waynesboro, Virginia. After the operation, he was told he was being taken to Washington, D.C., in the company commander's car to receive the Medal of Honor. President Harry Truman placed it around his neck on October 12, 1945.