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CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTOR
The Medal of Honor Winner
Who Wouldn't Use A Gun

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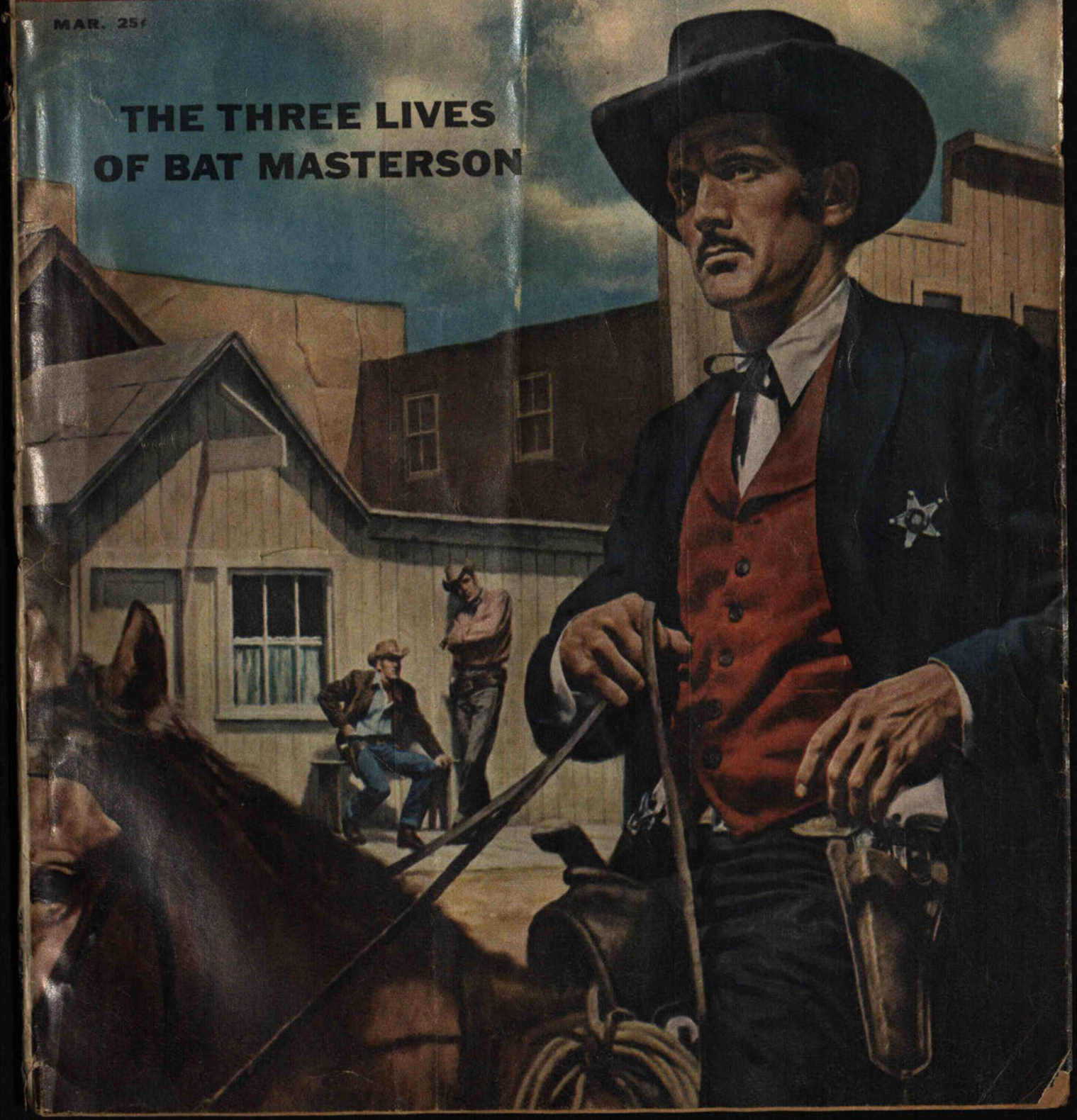


CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTOR

The Medal Of Honor Winner Who Wouldn't Use A Gun

In basic training, the stubborn medic drove the brass crazy with his refusal to touch a weapon or work on the Sabbath. But in combat, Desmond Doss was immense

By EDWARD LINN

THE men of the 77th Division love to tell this one: After the 77th Divison had completed its basic training at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, Major General Roscoe B. Woodruff called each regimental combat team before him to listen to a blood-and-guts, kill-or-be-killed lecture. When he got to the 307th, the men were marched to the forward slope of the hill just beyond the training area. The general addressed them from a wooden platform. "You will soon be shipped overseas," he said. "Your mission will be to kill the enemy. You may shoot at him from across barricades, you may meet him face to face and have to bayonet him in the belly." The general went on in this vein for a while, with bodies dropping gorily and graphically all around him. Then astoundingly, from the rear of the assemblage, one lone private stood up. In cool, clear tones, his voice cut across the field. "General, haven't you ever read your Bible?"

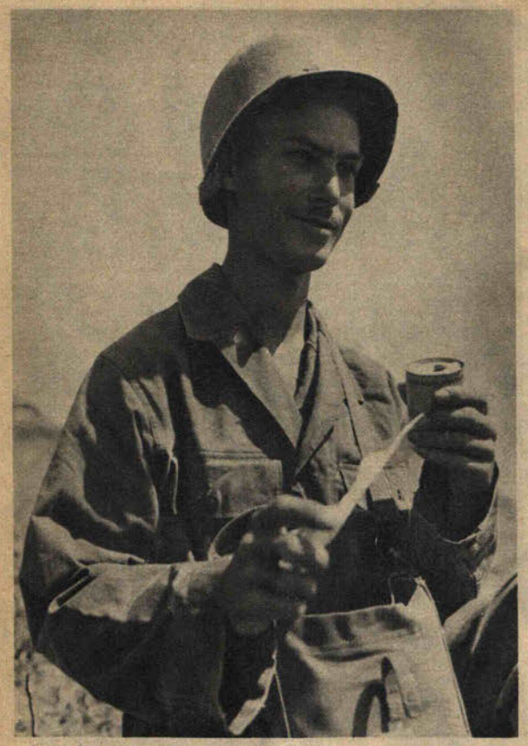
The general started to speak, then stopped. He was stunned. "Don't you know," the private said, "what the Bible says about loving thy brother as thyself? Don't you know it's a sin to preach hatred?"

The general just stared at him. It was only when the private sat down, amidst the suddenly heavy silence, that the general, still in a condition somewhat resembling battle shock, mumbled a few words and hastily departed.

Desmond T. Doss, Seventh-Day Adventist, thus became possibly the only private ever to reproach a two-star general in the presence of 3,000 witnesses. For that alone, he deserves the admiration of all ex-privates and pfc's—even if it never really happened.

The reason this inspired story was not received with the incredulity one might have expected among his colleagues, was Doss had already established himself as a man who put the Bible ahead of the Articles of War. During his two years of Stateside service, his utter disregard for ordinary military practice—based upon his utter confidence that he was obeying the dictates of God—drove his superiors crazy. And yet, it was this same

ILLUSTRATED BY NORTON STEWART



Doss's uniform was so bloodsoaked when he finished his rescue work on Okinawa, they got him a new one from the rear.

confidence in Divine protection that sent Desmond Doss onto a fire-swept cliff on Okinawa to evacuate dozens of wounded men and earned him the only Medal of Honor ever to be awarded a conscientious objector.

Doss himself always objected to that designation. When he went to his draft board in Lynchburg, Virginia, to register as a 1A-O, he insisted that he shouldn't be called a conscientious objector since his objection was not to serving, but only to killing. He thought, he said, that he should be called a "non-combatant."

The chairman of the draft board told him, drily: "We have only two choices here. You are either an objector or a non-objector."

To understand Doss, you have to know a little about the Seventh-Day Adventists, a world-wide sect numbering close to a million persons. The Adventists interpret everything in the Bible in the most narrow, most literal sense possible. Since God rested on the seventh day (Saturday), they believe He wanted mankind to rest on Saturday, too. And so they will do nothing on Saturday that could possibly be done on any other day of the week.

Since the Bible says, "Thou shalt not kill," they do not believe it is permissible to kill under any circumstances. They do go into the army as medics, however, and Doss conscientiously prepared himself for service by taking a medical training course at the Newport News shipyards where he was working as a carpenter.

Serving as a medic solves many problems for the Adventist. In the first place, it allows him to enter the army without forcing him to kill; in the second, it permits him to perform certain duties on the Sabbath. "You cannot work on the Sabbath," Doss explains. "But it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath. We know that, because Christ Himself healed on the Sabbath."

For his own part, Doss had always enjoyed helping people. As part of his work as a Missionary Volunteer for the church, he had, even as a boy, taken it upon himself to visit the sick with flowers and fruit. He had even served as a volunteer night nurse—with all the disagreeable chores that job entails—for those people too poor to afford one.

As a matter of fact, Doss could have got out of serving at all. There was a union battle going on at Newport News between the CIO and the AFL, and he was told by one organizer that he would be deferred as an essential worker if he would sign up. That, of course, was the worst possible approach he could have taken with Doss. "Who are you," Desmond told him coldly, "to tell Uncle Sam who has to serve and who doesn't?"

It should be noted that the interpretation of the Sixth Commandment is left, to some degree, to the conscience of the individual member of the Church. Doss's father, William T. Doss, is a deacon of the Lynchburg church, but his final words before his son left for the army, were: "Whatever you do, don't let them take you prisoner. Die fighting first."

Mr. Doss volunteered for Civil Defense work during the war and is now a part-time private detective, licensed to carry a gun. "If a man attacks you and your home and your family," he says, "do you mean you're not supposed to fight back with every weapon you can get your hands on?"

Desmond is an Adventist of a more somber hue. During his time in the army, he would not as much as lay one finger upon a gun.

Doss was sworn into the Army on Friday, April 1, 1942, at Camp Lee, Virginia, and issued a uniform. He immediately requested—and received—permission to attend a young people's meeting in the Adventist church in Petersburg, Virginia. However, the next day (his Sabbath) when he again requested a pass to Petersburg to attend church services, the barracks sergeant, not accustomed to hearing such requests from one-day soldiers, told him to knock it off and help get the barracks scrubbed down for inspection.

Now, if you remember, Adventists do not do on the Sabbath any work that can be done on other days, and obviously floors can very easily be scrubbed on, say, Wednesday. But, somehow, the sergeant was not quite able to accept this explanation. He reported Doss to a lieutenant, who hustled right over to show the recruit who was boss. When Desmond patiently explained his religious convictions, the officer told him he was a goof-off and a shirker and a goldbrick. But in the end, all he could say was, "Then get out of the barracks before I throw you out!"

Dutifully, Doss took himself outside and began to read his Bible. Immediately, another officer came charging up to him. "What are you doing out here, soldier?" he said. "Get back in there where you belong!"

Desmond scurried back through the door, and the first officer yelled: "I thought I told you to stay out of here!"

When Doss explained that he had been kicked back in, the lieutenant said: "Well, if you aren't going to help us, at least stay the hell out of our way."

Doss went to the far corner and read his Bible, while the rest of the GIs divided their time between cleaning up the place and cursing him. Thus passed Desmond Doss's first full day in the army.

If the abuse and the insults bothered him, he didn't show it. By mistake, he was shipped off to Fort Jackson, as an infantryman. When his company was ordered to pick up their rifles, he just didn't bother to go. The case was referred to a major at regimental level. The major tried to hand him a gun. Doss wouldn't take it. "In that case," the major said, "we'll have to ship you off to a conscientious objector's camp for the duration of the war."

Doss said he couldn't see how they could do that since he had signed on as a medic and was quite willing to serve in combat. He suggested that the major get him transferred over to the medical detachment where he belonged.

"For the time being," the major said, "you're with us. We're not asking you to kill anyone here. We're just insisting that you train with firearms like everybody else."

"I would rather put my faith in the Lord," Doss said, "than build up confidence in a weapon."

There is one question that is put to conscientious objectors, in every country, in every army. "What would you do if somebody was raping your wife. Would you go for a gun then?"

"I wouldn't have a gun."

"Suppose there was a gun nearby?"

"There wouldn't be a gun nearby."

"What would you do then?"

"Well," Doss told him. "I sure wouldn't stand by. I don't want to hurt anybody, but he would wish he was dead when I got through with him."

Even when he did get transferred to the medics a couple of weeks later—through the good offices of Chaplain Carl Stanley—Doss's troubles didn't end. The medics were supposed to learn how to handle a gun, too. His C.O., a dentist, undertook a personal crusade to get him to touch a gun—just touch it. He failed miserably.

If Doss thought the brass was harassing him, the brass thought, with equal justification, that he was harassing them. The constant point of irritation was not so much Doss's refusal to work on the Sabbath as his belief that he should get a pass every Saturday so that he could attend Adventist services in the city. When he was turned down at one level, he would press his request at the next level. The first week the major at Regiment told him: "I'll give you a pass for this Saturday, but I don't want you back here asking for special passes again."

The next week he was back. When he was turned down, he went to Division headquarters and got it. A week later, he climbed the chain of command to Regiment again, and the major told him: "No, you don't have permission to go to church tomorrow, and you don't have permission to go over my head for permission, either!"

Through the intercession of the chaplain, a divisional order eventually came down to the effect that Doss be given a pass on the Sabbath whenever possible. The major was so burned up that he delegated authority to

The man who had been cursed as a goldbrick accepted his Medal of Honor from President Truman on the White House lawn.

sign Doss's passes. To force himself to sign them personally, he felt, would be a clear case of cruel and unusual punishment. "Doss," he said. "Just give me a half-a-chance and I'll court-martial you in a minute."

"I will try, sir," said Doss, always respectful, "not to give you half-a-chance."

Even when he was out on maneuvers, Private Doss put in for the pass. His attitude was that God wanted him to get it, and it was hard to argue the point since he always seemed to succeed.

"We're moving 25 miles a day," his captain told him. "I can't give you a pass because you won't be able to get back to us."

"I'll get back," Doss promised, with his usual confidence. "Just give me an idea where you might be."

"You keep saying that God's giving you the pass," the captain said bitterly. "All right, let God show you how to get back."

"Thank you, sir," Doss said. "Please make out the pass and I'll be back."

He finally found his way back, if a little late, but the captain only asked, with (*Continued on page 66*)

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exaggerated concern, whether he had enjoyed his Sabbath.

In the war between Desmond Doss and the U.S. Army, the army always seemed to blow retreat. Even with a corps test coming up, Doss once applied for a Sabbath pass. His sergeant told him, with some satisfaction, that this was one exercise he wasn't going to get out of. Doss insisted, with equal fervor, that he couldn't participate in the test. To quote Desmond himself: "I was sad and perplexed and I asked God to give me wisdom. About half an hour before time to start on the test, I was studying my Sabbath school lesson and praying earnestly. Just as I finished, I looked up to see our aid station jeep driver coming toward me. He said, 'Jump in. The C.O. wants to speak to you at battalion headquarters. Wear your gas mask.'"

Doss was still struggling with the gas mask when the battalion C.O. (a lieutenant colonel) pulled up beside the jeep to tell him that the regimental C.O. (a full colonel) wanted him to report immediately to his command car.

The boss of the 307th Infantry Regiment was Colonel Stephen S. Hamilton, an awesome figure of a man, big, menacing, and equipped with a voice that sounded like the crack of doom. He wore a shaggy mustache that added to the general ferocity of his appearance. He knew all about the Doss case and he wasted no time getting to the point. "Now, what's all this about you not making the test tomorrow?" he demanded in his foghorn voice. "I thought I understood that you had no objection to taking care of the sick on the Sabbath."

Doss explained to the colonel that it was quite lawful to do good on the Sabbath, but that in three previous corps tests nobody had even been scratched. "And if there are a few injuries, there's a whole aid station here to take care of them. I can't conscientiously believe that I'd be keeping the Sabbath holy if I took part in the test."

The colonel explained very patiently that he considered himself a practicing Christian but that he found it impossible to keep up with Doss. "Would it be all right," he said, "if you just went out with the ambulance and treated anyone who might be brought to you?"

The battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Thomas B. Manuel, broke in quickly to inform the colonel that there were, unfortunately, no ambulances taking part in the test.

"All right," Colonel Hamilton said. "How about staying in the jeep with the captain then?"

Doss graciously consented to bend to that extent, even though he was a little troubled on completely non-religious grounds. If he were to get into the jeep with the captain, it would mean that the sergeant—who had insisted he take part in the test—would have to get out and walk. That did not seem to augur well for their future relations.

"But," Doss says now, "God always finds a way to help us." Desmond is being modest; God helps those who help themselves.

The two colonels were congratulating themselves on their solution when Desmond said: "Sir, may I ask a special favor of you?"

Colonel Hamilton groaned. "Make it fast, Doss, I'm in a hurry. What is it now?"

"Sir," Doss said. "My wife has been here for a week so that we could go to church together this weekend. Isn't it possible for me to get to church with her?"

Colonel Hamilton, as his combat record later proved, was an unusually brave man. But he knew when he was licked. "See that this man gets back to camp by sundown tonight," he told Colonel Manuel. And with that, he gunned off in his staff car.

Let us emphasize again that Doss was completely honest in everything he did. It would have been far easier to have run the tests, fired the guns, and worked on the Sabbaths. Let us point out, too, that the army, which had more to worry about than Desmond T. Doss's religious scruples, leaned over backwards to accommodate them. (When the 77th was billeted in Hawaii, Doss learned that the Japs didn't coax Seventh-Day Adventists into service in the Imperial Army; they just cut their throats open.) But there is not an army extant which does not believe it must have complete uniformity and absolute discipline. Everybody's left foot is supposed to hit the ground at the beat of the drum, and Doss was obviously marching to his own music. The army finally decided it would be just as well off without him.

Just before the outfit was to move out to Louisiana for maneuvers, some-

body decided to give him a Section 8.

Doss pointed out that while he might not work on Saturdays, he worked 24 hours on Sundays. (He covered for a Catholic medic, Clarence Glenn, on Sundays, and Glenn covered for him on Saturdays.) "If you look at the records," he said, "you'll find that Company B has lost less time through hospitalization than any other company in the outfit."

"In the army," his old friend, the major, told him, "it is necessary for a man to work seven days a week. We have to be able to count on his being there for training, and you say your religion won't allow you to be there on Saturdays. So there's nothing we can do but discharge you."

Doss insisted that he was quite willing to work on Saturdays where it was a clear case of healing the sick and wounded.

"We can't count on your interpretation," the major told him. "You're going to get a Section 8. That's the way it has to be."

"Then give me a straight discharge," Doss said. "A Section 8 means I'm mentally off."

"No, it doesn't," the major said. "It just means that you're peculiar on certain points."

The Section 8 had been approved all the way up the line even before Doss was called in, but he knew that there still had to be one final interview by the battalion C.O. before the case could be sent on to the Pentagon for final approval. In that interview, Doss emphasized that his work was admittedly of a very high quality and that he personally felt he would be a very poor Christian if he accepted a discharge based entirely upon his religious beliefs. If he missed certain aspects of training because of his scruples against working on the Sabbath, he said, it was his own life he was endangering. "It is a risk I willingly take," he said, "because I have every belief that God will give me wisdom and understanding to compensate for that loss of training."

As Doss suspected, the Pentagon was not willing to grant a Section 8 on such purely religious grounds.

But the major was still determined to get rid of him. Having already declared that Doss was "physically and mentally unfit for service" he now had him transferred to the pioneer engineers on the grounds that he was "physically, mentally and spiritually able for full field service."

When Desmond reported to the new outfit, the first sergeant told him that everybody in the outfit was supposed to carry a carbine, an ammunition kit and a trench knife. The lieutenant in charge of the company, said the sergeant, had bet him he would have Doss carrying the gun within thirty days. "Is he going to win," the sergeant asked, "or am I?"

"I don't believe in gambling," Doss said. "But since I can't figure any way to make you both lose, you're going to win."

When the lieutenant called him into his office and tried to hand him a gun, Doss understood the way it was going to go. The lieutenant was either going to win his bet or make a case for a court-martial.

Doss declined to take the gun.

"Listen carefully, Doss," the lieutenant said. "I'm giving you a direct order. Now, take this gun."

Doss said: "I do not believe it would be serving God to take it."

The lieutenant kept rephrasing it so that Doss would have to give a direct answer, and Doss kept basing his refusal on general religious grounds.

At last, the officer exploded. "Are you going to take this gun or not. Say yes or no."

"I'm sorry," Doss said, "but according to my religious convictions I can not."

The lieutenant gave up. He held out a pistol and, in a wheedling voice, said: "You can take this, Doss. It's not really a weapon."

Doss couldn't keep from laughing. "It isn't, sir?" he asked. "Then what is it?"

Doss spent the rest of his career as an engineer either on KP or on the coal and garbage details. He worked so much KP, in fact, that his hands were eaten raw by the lye that was used to clean the tables.

The lieutenant got his revenge in another way, too. Desmond's younger brother, Harold, got home on a pass from the Navy just as the pioneer engineers became eligible for a furlough. The lieutenant lined them all up in their barracks and passed down the aisle handing out the furlough papers. He got to Doss, put the papers in his hand, then snatched them back. "Oh, I forgot," he said. "You haven't qualified with your weapon yet, have you? That's too bad. There's a regimental rule that no combat man gets a furlough until he has qualified with his weapon."

And standing there in front of the whole barracks, he ripped up the papers and let the pieces drift to the floor.

Desmond called his father to tell him he couldn't get home. Mr. Doss immediately sent a telegram to the War Service Commission, the Seventh-Day Adventist bureau that had been set up to act as liaison between the armed services and the members of the faith. The next day, Doss was ordered to report to the regimental aid station. "Congratulations," the major told him. "You are back in the medics."

Within the week, Doss received copies of letters, signed by President Roosevelt and General George C. Marshall, stating that as a member of the Seventh-Day Adventist church, he could not be forced to bear arms against his will.

If the officer corps had little love for Doss, the enlisted men—the men with whom he had to spend most of his time—liked him even less. At first they thought he was bucking for a discharge; afterwards, they decided he was a nut. Almost from the first, he was nicknamed, with no noticeable affection, The Preacher. He faithfully observed his morning and evening devotions, trying to get up before reveille so that he could pray while the others were asleep, but at night he had to take out his prayer book while everybody was watching. It wasn't an easy thing to do. Shoes would come flying at him along with the insults. And the insults were almost always preceded by, "God damn it all, Doss . . ." or "Jesus H. Christ, Doss . . ."

"You go into combat with me, you yellow bastard," some would tell him, with rough humor, "and I'll shoot you down myself."

What griped them most of all, though, was the matter of those steady Sabbath passes. "You get more passes," they would say bitterly, "than the general himself."

In the end, of course, Desmond won everybody's deepest respect. In a way, the story of Desmond Doss is the story of a man who won two of mankind's most important battles. He won the inner battle by living according to his personal religious beliefs under almost impossible conditions, then he won the outer battle by proving to the world that those beliefs were not based on any lack of bravery or willingness to do his share.

The time finally came when men who had once cursed him came to ask him to pray for them, when officers who had tried to kick him out of the service humbly apologized to him. One pfc who was perpetually drunk—most outfits have at least one guy who somehow manages to get hold of the stuff no matter how far from civilization he may roam—came to his tent on Okinawa and asked him for help in living a better life. Doss, who thought he was being needled again, gave the soldier's classic reply: "Go see the chaplain."

In all seriousness, the GI said: "I did go to see the chaplain. All he did was give me a drink."

The change in Doss's acceptance did not come, though, until the 77th had been shipped overseas. His reputation for a bravery that almost amounted to total indifference to danger started to make the rounds after the 77th went in on Leyte. Doss was one of the litter bearers with the first wave that hit the beach at Ormoc in the famous "end run" behind the Jap lines. For two days, the litter bearers were kept busy. On the third, Desmond's pal, Clarence Glenn, got three bullets in his body while he was administering first aid to a wounded man in completely exposed territory. Doss and another medic, Herb Schechter, went out to try to bring them both in. Schechter went after Glenn; Desmond crawled over to the wounded infantryman Glenn had been helping. The guy had been hit in the head and blood had trickled down into his eyes and crusted

over. When Doss got to him, he was just barely conscious. Doss took water from his canteen and swabbed the blood out of his eyes. As badly wounded as he was, the soldier's eyes opened wide, his mouth broke into a great wide smile, and he said: "I can see . . ." ("It was," Doss says, "the greatest thrill I ever got in my life.")

He didn't have much time to enjoy it, because Schechter called across that Glenn was pretty far gone. Just then, the Japs launched a mild attack, and both medics had to play dead. When the attack had been beaten back, they put the two wounded men on a poncho and dragged them back to their own lines, across a field so littered with the end product of battle that the poncho had to be dragged over dead bodies.

As soon as he reached the 77th lines, Doss seized a machete and hacked down two bamboo trees. He wrapped one side of the poncho to each of the poles, put Glenn on the improvised litter, and, with Schechter on the other end, tried to rush his only real friend back to the aid station. He didn't quite make it in time.

For a week, Doss and Schechter teamed up on the dangerous missions. They once got trapped behind enemy lines while "saving" a man who—they found to their disgust—had only a minor foot wound. They were a peculiar pair: Doss felt that God was watching over him; Schechter was a fatalist who felt that you got it when your number was up, so it didn't matter whether you were huddled in a foxhole or standing on an exposed hill.

Schechter's number came up when he was picked off by a sniper just as he, Doss and two other medics had got a wounded man across the Ormoc River. As the three surviving medics were putting the wounded man in the litter-jeep, a machine gun opened up from the other side of the river. The others were able to jump into the jeep as it shot away; Doss had to grab the back of the jeep with one hand and hold on, his feet churning up and down like a sprinter, but his shoes rarely hit the ground.

The belief that Doss might well be under some sort of divine protection became general when, within full view of thousands of GI's dug in on the surrounding hills, he crawled into a rice paddy field to rescue a badly wounded man. From above, they could see him crawling directly into the muzzle of a Jap machine gun, until he was so close that the gunner could have hit him with a rock. For some reason, though, the Jap held his fire. He let Doss come in, pick up his man and get out again. It is possible that the Jap was reluctant to fire on an unarmed man, but that is not too persuasive a theory since Japanese policy was known to call for picking off the medics early in any battle as a means of striking at the morale of the fighting men. The rate of casualties among the medics in the Pacific was enormous.

If God were indeed watching over him—and we mean no disrespect in saying this—then God has a true dramatic sense. Doss had come into his first army camp on the Sabbath and he had walked into his first battle area on the Sabbath. You know perfectly well that if Hollywood were doing it, Doss would have to perform his greatest act of heroism on the Sabbath. He did.

It would seem, in fact, that a plot-writer took over as soon as the 77th got to Okinawa. If you were writing a scenario, you would have to develop at least one of the enmities he had made in the States and resolve the conflict in battle. Perhaps you would try something like this:

Despite his growing reputation as a totally fearless man, Doss got into a little trouble during the early fighting on Okinawa. When the boys in the company to which he was attached went out on patrol ("looking for trouble," they called it), they would usually ask Doss to go along with them. One day, though, he returned from a trip to the aid station to find that a patrol—composed mostly of replacements—had gone off into the woods without any medic at all. Upon Captain Frank Vernon's orders, he immediately set out to join them. Some of the replacements had buck fever, however, and whenever Doss tried to move up, they would fire on him. Since getting shot at by both sides was above and beyond the call of duty, not to say of reason, Doss gave it up and returned to the command post. Vernon disliked medics—he thought they were all goldbricks—and he particularly disliked Doss. His principal gripe at the time was that the medics pampered his men by sending them back to the hospital to get their feet treated for jungle rot, a fungus disease that plagued the American troops on Okinawa.

At any rate, Vernon ordered him to go back into the woods and make another attempt at joining the patrol. Doss refused. Vernon ordered him back to await a court-martial. But there was no trial. Colonel Hamilton reportedly was so burned up about it that he told Vernon he would demote him the moment he filed charges against Doss. Doss's own medical detachment C.O. was angry, too. "He's got the best medic in the army," he said, "and he doesn't appreciate him. Well, he hasn't got him any more." He took Desmond away from B Company and assigned him to the base hospital.

Naturally, if this were a movie, Captain Vernon would get hit with a very bad case of jungle rot. Naturally, he wouldn't want to go back to the hospital to get it treated. Naturally, it would get worse.

Naturally, because this is Desmond Doss's story, that is exactly what happened.

When word did get back to the hospital, a medic corporal licked his chops, clicked his heels and went out to treat Vernon. When he came back, he said: "I fixed the sonofabitch. I fixed him so he's flat on his back."

So Doss went back to treat him. He told Vernon he would do the best he could for him and he did well enough to get him back on his feet. While he was being treated, Vernon kept apologizing for the way he had acted in the past. When B Company lost its medics, Doss volunteered to stay. "If there's anything I can do to help you while you're with us," Vernon told him. "Anything at all . . . Just let me know."

Now, if Captain Vernon of B Company hadn't cared for Doss, there would have been no cause for him to argue with Lieutenant Cecil Gornto. Gornto had his own Stateside memories of Doss. During maneuvers on the Arizona desert, water was sent out periodically to replenish the supply. Once, after the truck carrying the water cans had been delayed for a day, and the men were parched with thirst, the officers took their own sweet time about handing the water out. The men began to gripe about it, and since Doss was charged with guarding their health, and was also known to be one guy who would tell off the brass, the men kept bringing their complaints to him. Finally, a report, probably false, came to him that the officers were using water for washing and shaving.

Doss drove down to headquarters and told Gornto, "Pass out that water."

Gornto said: "Listen, Doss, I'm still running this outfit, not you."

"The men need this water," Doss told him. "If you don't give the order to pass it out right now, I'm going to report you to the medical officer."

The water was passed out, but Doss reported Lieutenant Gornto to the medical officer anyway. The medical officer told him that the water would most certainly have been passed out anyhow, and he talked Doss out of making a Federal case out of it. But the story got back to Gornto. (Looking back, Doss is quite willing to admit that a little more tact and a little less righteousness on his part would have smoothed his passage through the army.)

At any rate, these were the men Doss was serving under during the bloody battle for the Escarpment on Okinawa.

The Escarpment was a peculiarly shaped coral hill (Hill 187 on the military maps) that lay across the American advance toward Shuri. The head-on approach to the top of the Escarpment was a long, sweeping incline. Along the right-hand side, the terrain broke away, in degrees, until it developed into a perpendicular drop, perhaps 50 feet high. The Japs were holed out in pillboxes along the upper plateau and in the high ground above.

The battle plan called for some elements from A Company to attack straight up the incline while other elements of the company scaled the cliff up ahead. The 2nd platoon of B Company (Lieutenant Gornto's platoon) had advanced to the bottom of the cliff. They were to climb up and over during the battle and hit the enemy at the flank along the high plateau.

Gornto's men did get one break. About six feet from the top of the cliff, there was a ledge. Upon this ledge was a tall, thin tree. An advance contingent was able to scale the wall and tie a cargo net, obtained from one of the transport ships back at the beach, and a rope to the tree. The men were to climb up the cargo net; the ammunition and supplies were to be pulled up by the rope. There was still one commodity lacking. B Company had only one medic fit for action—Desmond Doss. It was Saturday and Doss was reading his Bible. Captain Vernon went to him and asked if he would go along with them. He asked; he didn't order. "Men die on Saturday, too, you know," he said.

"All right," Doss said. "Just give me a few minutes to finish what I'm reading."

Desmond's impression was that he only took five or ten minutes to finish his devotion, although he won't take issue with the reports that said the battle waited on him for half an hour.

Before the 2nd platoon moved off, he told Lieutenant Gornto that prayer was the greatest life-saver he knew of. What he had in mind was a brief moment of silence so that each man could pray in his own way. Gornto, misinterpreting him, told the men: "Doss wants to pray for us."

They were all glad to let him. He prayed first that they would all come back alive if it were God's will, and then he prayed that Lieutenant Gornto would have the wisdom and understanding to give the right orders.

The platoon was pinned down by Japanese fire, but it didn't lose any men. A Company, attacking up the incline, suffered tremendous casualties. The company was so badly chewed up, in fact, that it could not be committed to the attack again. The 2nd platoon, plus an attached demolition squad, was ordered to take the ridge alone. Under protective machine-gun fire, the platoon broke loose and overran the eight pillboxes on the plateau. Miraculously, it still had not suffered a casualty.

But there remained a Jap pillbox under the rise at the very top of the Escarpment. The 2nd Platoon came back the next day and threw everything they had at it, but they couldn't seem to knock it out. The demolition squad tried its explosives, but the Japs kept pulling the fuses. The Americans decided to pour gasoline over the pillbox, but something

went wrong and four of our own men were blown up. Finally, they threw in five water cans filled with high-octane gas and followed that up with a white phosphorous grenade. It worked to perfection. The whole back of the mountain rocked in the brilliant white flame. The pillbox disappeared.

The only trouble was that there were lots more pillboxes on the back side of the mountain. The Japs began to pour over the rise, overwhelming the lone platoon through sheer force of numbers. About 155 men had climbed up the cargo net; only about 55 got back down. Doss, who had stayed on the ridge with his wounded, was faced with the impossible task of evacuating 100 men under enemy fire. He tried to get the first few down the cargo net by litter, but they were too badly wounded to help themselves and they kept getting snarled up in the netting. He decided to try to lower them by the rope. Fortunately, he had learned to tie knots in the Adventists' Junior Friend program back in Lynchburg. He took the rope and tied a double bow-line knot, which allowed him to truss the men up firmly. He wrapped the rope around the tree twice, and after the men were securely tied, he would feed the rope through so that its cargo was lowered slowly to the litter-bearers below.

Captain Vernon kept yelling for Doss to come down, since it seemed that the Japs could pick him off whenever they felt like it. But Doss kept going back, time and again, to bring back another man. He did not, Doss takes pains to emphasize, set out initially to get everybody. He kept telling himself, he says, to get one more man. Just one more man. "I knew I wouldn't get killed," Doss says. "I don't know how, I just knew it all along. I did think there was a chance I might get wounded, but I figured it was worth it if I could save one more guy who might have a wife and family at home." (The 77th was a draft outfit out of New York, and a lot of family men had been tossed into it. Its average age was high. As a matter of fact, they used to call it the "Old Man's Outfit.")

These were the men who had ridiculed Doss and insulted him, and these were the men he now risked his life to save. He kept going back for one more. Just one more. At one point, he had to pull a severely wounded man across a shaky wooden ladder 25 feet above a gully.

In the end, he kept going back until everybody had been evacuated. His uniform was so completely saturated with blood that as soon as Captain Vernon saw him, he sent a runner back to get a fresh uniform for him.

Stories of his incredible bravery reverberated around the island. Doss himself says, "There were some men who were able to get back to the ledge by themselves, but the way the stories were going afterwards, nobody felt they had really been saved unless Doss had saved them." When he was called to headquarters during the time they were drawing up the recommendation for his medal, he was told he had evacuated 100 men.

"I wasn't counting," Doss told them, "but I know I didn't have time to take care of any 100 men."

They asked him how many he thought he had evacuated.

"Well," he said. "Maybe 50."

So they split the difference. The official reports said he had saved "about 75" men.

The original recommendation was for a DSM. It became a Medal of Honor when Doss continued to perform daily acts of heroism over the next three weeks.

In the fighting at the back of the Escarpment, four men were cut down less than 25 feet from the mouth of one of the caves. Doss crawled across the battlefield to treat them, then brought them back, one at a time. Again, it was a case of going directly into the barrel of a machine gun and not being fired upon. This time, he did it four separate times.

The following day, during heavy fighting on top of the Escarpment, a captain came back with the report that Colonel Maddox, an artillery officer, lay dying on the battlefield. "There's no use trying to help him," the captain said. "His back is almost blown off."

Ignoring orders—nobody really expected him to obey them at this point—Doss went after the colonel. Not only was Maddox's back laid open but the lung was punctured. He was literally breathing through his back. Doss stuffed a big roll of bandage dressing against the wound to close up the lung, then called for plasma. As he was dragging him off the field, past the dead bodies that had piled up over the week of fighting, the needle fell out of the vein. Doss still managed to get him back to a doctor, but the colonel died almost immediately.

After two more weeks of heavy duty, Doss was going cross country, under cover of darkness, with a group of replacements. Something went wrong up ahead of them and the order came back to dig in for the night. Desmond got into a shellhole with three other guys. The others fixed their bayonets, for it was against regulations to fire a gun or throw a grenade after you were holed in for the night. If a Jap pointed a gun at you from, say ten yards away, you were just out of luck.

Looking out, Doss could see a Jap moving along the skyline. Then he could see the fuse of some sort of explosive floating toward him. And then he could see it drop into the shellhole, right at his feet. The other three men scrambled out. Doss figured it was too late for him. He slammed his left foot over the grenade, hoping that the heavy combat shoe would absorb enough of the shock so that he would lose only his foot. That was the best he hoped to get out with, though—a lost foot. The explosion lifted him up and turned him over, but when he got his breath back, he still had his foot. (As it turned out, he was unbelievably lucky. Only one piece of the metal ripped through the shoe, fracturing a toe. The rest of the shrapnel sprayed up his legs and buttocks. Sixteen hunks of metal eventually were dug out of him.)

The smart thing seemed to be to get out of the shellhole before any more grenades were lobbed in. Doss rolled out and began to crawl down the hill. He hadn't gone far before he realized that he was in shock and was about to pass out. He stretched himself out, with his head down the mountain so the blood would rush to his brain. When he regained consciousness, he found a foxhole. Another GI, with a bullet in his arm, came by looking for cover in the darkness, so Doss helpfully dug around the edges of the hole until it was big enough to accommodate them both.

In the morning, he woke up to see an unexploded artillery shell nestling beside him, less than six inches from his head. Since duds were known to explode when they were jostled, Doss congratulated himself for not having tried to extend the hole in that direction. It seemed just as well, too, that he hadn't been restless and tossed and turned in his sleep.

Eventually, he was picked up by a team of litter bearers who were prowling the area. It seemed to Doss, though, that some of the walking wounded were more seriously wounded than he was. When sniper fire forced the medics to drop the litter, Desmond rolled off and insisted that they pick up another man and rush him to the hospital.

With the help of another walking wounded—Pfc. Lewis Brooks of Richmond—Doss limped on toward the hospital. Because his left arm was crooked around Brooks' neck, to take the weight off his left foot, Doss ended up with one of the war's most peculiar injuries. A sniper, apparently aiming at Brooks' head, missed by about an inch; the bullet smashed into Doss's arm, just above the wrist, came out the lower arm just beneath the crook of the elbow, went back in just above the crook of the elbow and came to rest just beneath the surface of the upper arm. So Doss shows four scars from that one bullet.

It wasn't until he was back in the hospital that Desmond realized he had lost his Bible, a leather-covered, zipper-fastened Bible that his wife, Dorothy, had given him when they were married on August 17, 1942, on his first pass from the army. (Dorothy was a *colporteur*, a traveling salesman of religious literature.)

When the word went out that Doss had lost his Bible, the whole battle area was still in flux. But B Company sent out a patrol to try to find the shellhole in which he had been injured. It took a couple of days, but they finally did find the Bible, soaked by the rains and beginning to come loose at the binding.

And so it was that the men who had once thrown shoes at him for reading the Bible in the barracks ended by risking their very lives to get it back for him.

That would be a nice note to end the story on, and maybe we ought to. But that wasn't where it ended for Desmond Doss. He came back to the States on a hospital ship. When his family first saw him, both his arms were in casts and stuck out as stiff as a scarecrow's. He was unbelievably skinny and his wounds, he remembers, still stank.

Although he was discharged from the army upon his return, Doss spent the next five years in various hospitals. For while he was recuperating from his wounds, his chest began to bother him. Doss thought he was coming down with pleurisy, but X-rays showed that he had tuberculosis in both of his lungs and in his bronchial tube as well. The hospital found it difficult to prepare a diet for him, since Seventh-day Adventists do not eat meat. (The Bible offers no evidence that there were any animals in the Garden of Eden, adequate proof—think the Adventists—that the Lord did not intend for man to eat flesh.) At first, Doss did consent to eat beef, for medicinal rather than nutritional purposes, but when they began to put pork on his plate, he called a halt. He bought his own soy beans, a high protein food which is the staple of any vegetarian diet, and instructed the kitchen in their varied preparation.

He battled the TB at the McGuire and Fitzsimmons Hospitals, and at one point seemed to be cured. But after he had been bumped out of Fitzsimmons and sent away from that salutary Denver climate, he suffered a bad relapse. In the end, he had to have his left lung and five ribs taken out.

The bullet wounds, which had incapacitated three fingers and restricted the movement of his arm, prevented him from returning to his pre-war work as a carpenter. On top of that, his wife, who had been working as a schoolteacher to support the family, became seriously ill. Doss took her to a Seventh-day Adventist Sanitarium in Wildwood, Georgia.

He himself trained at the sanitarium in medical missionary work.

Last year, Desmond bought a five-acre farm, halfway down the Georgia side of Lookout Mountain. He is just getting his farm and orchard started, but, at least, it supplies food for himself, his wife and his 10-year-old son. Desmond Jr. Beyond that, he lives on his 90 percent army pension.

Although he obviously could have minted a few dollars out of his Medal of Honor, Doss turned down a movie bid for his story when they told him they would have to embellish it with a certain amount of fiction. He had already had an unfortunate experience with fictional treatments when NBC, in dramatizing his story, had him use the name of the Lord in vain and even consent to do something against his scruples on the grounds that "God won't mind it this one time." If Desmond Doss believes one thing, it is that God minds *all* transgressions.

"I don't want credit for anything," he emphasizes, in talking about his life, both in the army and out. "Whatever I've done, I've done through the Grace of God." And then Desmond T. Doss, Medal of Honor winner, voices a sentiment that is almost always on his lips: "I don't know why the Lord has been so good to me."

★THE END