

UNLIKELY HERO STILL AIDS VETERANS

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The memory of Lynchburg, Virginia's, "hometown hero," Desmond T. Doss is helping homeless veterans in Central Virginia

Do you know the story of Desmond Doss? You may have seen part of it in the award-winning 2016 movie "Hacksaw Ridge." But that was only part of the Desmond Doss story.

Born in Lynchburg, VA, on 7 February 1919, Desmond Thomas Doss was a devout Seventh-Day Adventist who strictly adhered to the Ten Commandments. On the day Pearl Harbor was attacked, 7 December 1941, Doss was working as a shipbuilder at the Newport News Shipyard in Virginia. While his employment could have merited an active-duty deferment, Doss wanted to serve his country and its citizens. With his brother in the Navy, Desmond entered the United States Army at Camp (now Fort) Lee, VA, on 1 April 1942. He was assigned to the 77th Infantry Division and sent to Fort Jackson, SC, for training.

There was just one problem. Doss's religious beliefs forbade him from killing or even carrying a weapon. When Army officials became aware of his beliefs, they offered to release him from the Army as a "conscientious objector." Doss refused. He wanted to serve, to save lives but not to kill. This did not endear him to his fellow soldiers.

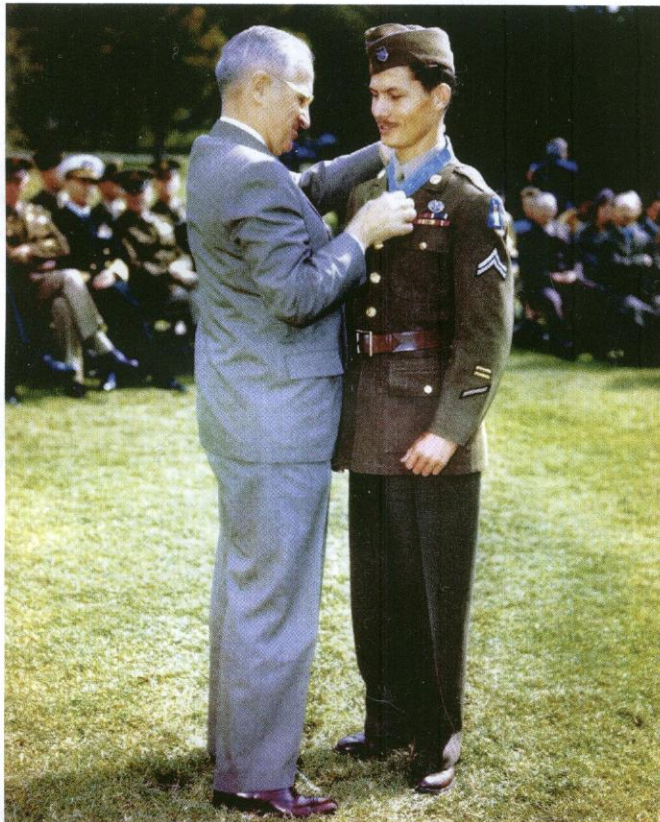
Doss was harassed during his training, ostracized by his unit, bullied by both enlisted men and officers, including his commander. Doss held fast to his faith, accepted the abuse without complaint, and completed his training as a Company Aid Man (MOS 68W), commonly called a "Combat Medic." He was posted to 2nd Platoon, Company B, 1st Battalion,

307th Infantry, 77th Infantry Division.

In 1944, his unit shipped out to the Pacific, just in time for The Second Battle of Guam (21 July–10 August 1944) as US forces fought to recapture that Japanese-held island. The soldiers who reviled Doss during training now came to respect and admire the Bible-toting medic who frequently risked his life to rescue and treat them. They now affectionately nicknamed Doss "The Preacher." Doss was awarded a Bronze Star Medal for his bravery during the battle.

In October 1944, the 307th Infantry made an amphibious landing on Leyte in the Philippines. From 17 October–26 December 1944, with continued disregard for his own safety, Doss saved the lives of many comrades. He was awarded a second Bronze Star Medal, this time with an Oak Leaf Cluster and a "V" for valor.

The 307th arrived on Okinawa and moved into the battle line on 29 April 1945. They were positioned on the Maeda Escarpment known as "Hacksaw



President Harry S. Truman awarded Desmond T. Doss the Medal of Honor on 12 October 1945, at the White House.



Ridge.” Heavily fortified by the Japanese, the escarpment could only be reached by climbing cargo nets suspended on its 400-foot high cliff face. By 5 May, the fighting had intensified to where the US position was untenable. The 307th was ordered to retreat.

But 75 soldiers were too wounded to make it down the cliff face. Doss refused to leave them behind. By rigging an ingenious rope harness, Doss was able to bring one soldier down the cliff. He went back up and got another. One by one, he managed to bring all 75 men to safety. True to his faith, Doss prayed as he worked, repeatedly saying, “One more, Lord, just one more!”

Doss was wounded four times on Okinawa, suffering a left arm fracture from a sniper’s bullet and seventeen pieces of shrapnel embedded in his body. He was eventually evacuated on 21 May 1945. For his injuries in combat Doss was awarded the Purple Heart with two Bronze Oak Leaf Clusters.

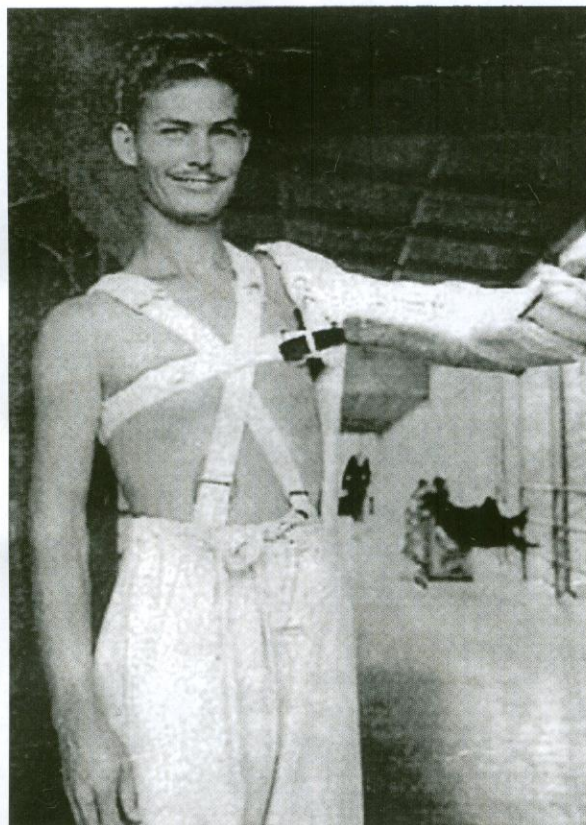
For his heroic actions on Okinawa, Private First Class Desmond T. Doss was nominated to receive the Congressional Medal of Honor, which, if approved, would be presented by the President of the United States in the name of the US Congress. His medal citation reads, in part,

Through his outstanding bravery and unflinching determination in the face of desperately dangerous conditions Private First Class 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.

President Harry S. Truman presented the Medal of Honor on 12 October 1945 on the White House

lawn in Washington, DC. Doss was the first soldier offered conscientious objector status in American history to receive the nation’s highest military award.

Doss had sustained long-term injuries in the war, including tuberculosis, which required the removal of a lung and five ribs. Even though he was 100% disabled, he raised a family on a small farm in Rising Fawn, GA. Later he moved to Piedmont, AL, where he died on 23 March 2006 at the age of 87.



Desmond T. Doss in hospital rehabilitating from war wounds

Desmond Doss grew up in a white frame house with his father William, his mother Bertha, sister Audrey, and brother Harold at 1309 Garfield Avenue in Lynchburg, VA. The house was built in 1909 as the city grew. The house had several owners over the years and, sadly, fell into disrepair. After having been taken in default by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development in 1999 and again by the US Department of Veterans Affairs in 2014, the house stood vacant for several years. Now Doss’s birthplace has new life and a new mission. Enter the Lynchburg Area Veterans Council.

The Lynchburg Area Veterans Council (LAVC)

is a volunteer organization bringing together the Virginia Piedmont Chapter of the Military Order of the World Wars, American Legion Post 16, the Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 12179, Marine Corps League Detachment 759, Military Order of the Purple Heart 1607, and Vietnam Veterans of America 196. It also includes area veterans, businesses, and community leaders. The LAVC offers several support programs to area veterans in need. One of these programs is assistance to homeless veterans.





(L-R): Dorothy P. Desmond T. and Dorothy P. Doss

In 2019, LAVC rented the Doss House, which was then restored and furnished to house three homeless veterans. The house was opened on 12 October 2019 in ceremonies attended by Doss's son, Desmond T. "Tommy" Doss, Jr., and Lynchburg's Mayor, Treney Tweedy. At that ceremony, 12 October was designated as "Desmond Doss Day" in Lynchburg, VA. However, the story does not end there.

Generous community support enabled the LAVC to purchase 1309 Garfield Avenue on 17 April 2020. On 12 October 2020, exactly seventy-five years after President Truman presented Desmond Doss the Congressional Medal of Honor, the Desmond Doss Veterans House was formally dedicated. Attending were members of Lynchburg City Council, representatives of the Lynchburg area veterans' organizations, the Chief of Police, the Fire Chief, many community leaders, members of the public, and Desmond T. Doss, Jr.



The Desmond T. Doss Veterans Home

During this ceremony, the Virginia Piedmont Chapter of the Military Order of the World Wars played a prominent role. Vice Commander of the Virginia Piedmont Chapter, CDR C.

Michael Reeves, USN (Ret), offered the invocation. A plaque provided by the Piedmont Chapter honoring Corporal Desmond T. Doss and naming the veterans

home was then unveiled by Virginia Piedmont Chapter Commander LCDR Joel D. Kramar, USN (Ret). The plaque, which is now mounted by the house's front door, reads:

THE DESMOND T. DOSS
VETERANS HOME
BIRTHPLACE OF
DESMOND T. DOSS, 7 FEBRUARY 1919
PFC, COMBAT MEDIC, US ARMY
AWARDED THE MEDAL OF HONOR
FOR HEROIC ACTION ON OKINAWA, 1945
BRONZE STAR W/V DEVICE AND OAK LEAF CLUSTER
PURPLE HEART
DEDICATED 12 OCTOBER 2019
ON DESMOND T. DOSS DAY IN LYNCHBURG
BY THE LYNCHBURG AREA VETERANS COUNCIL, INC.

In an interview with the news media, son Tommy Doss said, "I love the phrase that he said over and over and over as he rescued these men: "Lord, just one more!" He did not ask to save 75 men. He did not even ask to save a dozen. He said, 'Can I just save one more?'"

In that spirit, the house where Desmond Doss was born is now being used to house homeless veterans and help them get their lives back on track. The legacy of an unlikely hero in World War II—patriotism, faith, and service—lives on today.

The Virginia Piedmont Chapter of the Military Order of the World Wars is proud to be a part of the Lynchburg Area Veterans Council and, with other local veterans organizations, which makes a meaningful difference for our community and for the veterans of Central Virginia. ★

