

AN ANALYSIS OF DESMOND T. DOSS' STRUGGLE IN HACKSAW RIDGE MOVIE

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the struggle of Desmond T. Doss in the film Hacksaw Ridge. Doss is portrayed as a devout Seventh-day Adventist who refuses to carry a weapon during World War II. The research focuses on how the film presents his moral dilemma, inner conflict, and the message of nonviolence through his character. The method used in this study is a library-based qualitative approach. The primary data is the film Hacksaw Ridge (2016) directed by Mel Gibson. Data collection involves watching the film, understanding the character, and interpreting the storyline using film theory and moral-philosophical analysis. The result shows that Doss's religious belief causes him to face rejection and alienation from fellow soldiers. However, the same belief becomes his source of strength. Visual and auditory elements such as lighting, silence, and camera angles are used to portray his moral conflict. The film ultimately presents heroism not through violence, but through moral conviction and the courage to stay true to one's values.

Keywords: *Desmond Doss, Heroism*

INTRODUCTION

Desmond T. Doss's struggle in *Hacksaw Ridge* is an extraordinary account of moral courage, religious conviction, and personal integrity set against the backdrop of one of the bloodiest chapters in history—World War II. The film, directed by Mel Gibson and based on true events, follows the journey of Doss, a devout Seventh-day Adventist, who voluntarily enlisted in the U.S. Army but refused to carry or use weapons due to his belief in nonviolence. His stance, rooted in his spiritual upbringing, placed him in direct opposition to military norms, making him a target of mockery, physical abuse, and institutional discrimination (Mange, 2017).

Despite these challenges, Doss remained steadfast. His refusal to bear arms

was not an act of defiance, but a demonstration of his unwavering commitment to saving lives rather than taking them. This decision led him to serve as a combat medic, where he endured not only the horrors of war but also relentless pressure from his fellow soldiers and superiors to conform. His struggle was not merely physical but deeply psychological and ethical, as he navigated the tension between duty to country and devotion to faith (McAteer, 2023).

The turning point of Doss's journey comes during the Battle of Okinawa, where, under relentless gunfire and chaos, he managed to rescue more than 75 wounded soldiers without ever using a weapon. This act of selflessness and bravery earned him the Medal of Honor, making him the first conscientious objector in American history to receive such recognition. More than a military accomplishment, Doss's actions highlighted the possibility of moral resistance within the most violent of contexts (Society & Sacrifice, n.d.).

Cinematically, *Hacksaw Ridge* elevates Doss's story using stark contrasts between the brutality of battle scenes and the quiet strength of his personal convictions. Visual techniques such as slow motion, high-contrast lighting, and intense soundscapes enhance the emotional and ethical depth of Doss's experience (Westwell, 2020). These elements emphasize not only what Doss endures, but also what he represents—a model of heroism grounded in compassion and conscience, rather than aggression.

The broader significance of Doss's story lies in its challenge to traditional ideals of masculinity, strength, and heroism in war narratives. Where most soldiers are celebrated for their combat skills, Doss is honored for his refusal to fight. His character confronts the viewer with difficult questions: Can one be courageous without violence? Is moral conviction enough to survive war? How does one define heroism in a world built around destruction?

Several scholars have explored these themes. Nisco (2021) argues that Doss represents a cinematic archetype of the moral resistor, someone whose refusal to conform becomes a source of inspiration and transformation. Westwell (2020)

similarly notes that the film critiques militaristic norms by elevating Doss's pacifist values through both narrative and cinematography. These perspectives underscore the relevance of examining how *Hacksaw Ridge* frames Doss's internal and external struggles as more than personal conflicts—they are moral statements with social implications.

Based on the background above, this study is guided by the following central problems: (1) What aspects of Desmond T. Doss's struggle can be analyzed in the film *Hacksaw Ridge*? (2) How does the film depict Doss's moral dilemmas and personal conflicts in facing challenges on the battlefield? (3) What messages are conveyed through the character's struggles in the film?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this study, the researcher used a library research method with a qualitative descriptive approach. The library research method involves collecting data from various sources such as books, journal articles, and online databases. The primary data source in this study is the film *Hacksaw Ridge* (2016), directed by Mel Gibson, while secondary sources include the film's script, scholarly articles, reviews, and historical references related to Desmond T. Doss.

The data collection technique consists of several stages. First, the researcher watched the entire film multiple times to understand its plot, themes, and the portrayal of Desmond Doss's character. The researcher then read and analyzed the film's transcript and script to highlight important dialogue and narrative points related to Doss's struggles. Next, the researcher reviewed secondary literature such as film analyses, journal articles, and historical texts to enrich the understanding of the film's context and moral dimensions.

The data analysis process also followed a systematic procedure. After reading and understanding the collected data, the researcher codified the data into categories such as character dialogue, narration, and visual elements that represent

Doss's moral dilemmas, personal struggles, and ethical decisions. These

coded data were then analyzed using relevant theoretical approaches, including moral-philosophical criticism and narrative film theory. The researcher compared and reviewed the findings in relation to the concepts discussed in Chapter II.

Finally, the researcher interpreted the data to describe how *Hacksaw Ridge* represents Desmond T. Doss's internal and external struggles. The analysis aimed to identify how moral conviction, social resistance, and cinematic storytelling contribute to the construction of Doss's character. The study also provides conclusions about how the film redefines heroism through nonviolence and integrity in the context of war.

ANALYSIS

A. Religious Conviction as the Foundation of Desmond Doss's Struggles

Desmond Doss's religious conviction serves as the central foundation of his identity and moral trajectory in *Hacksaw Ridge*. As a devout member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Doss firmly believes in the biblical commandment "Thou shalt not kill." This belief forms a strict personal code that prohibits him from bearing arms or participating in violence, even when faced with the brutal realities of war. His commitment to this value becomes the main source of tension between his faith and his role as a soldier in the U.S. Army (Nisa, Muhid, & Heriyanto, 2022).

Unlike other soldiers who enter the battlefield prepared to take lives for the sake of victory, Doss joins the military with the intention of saving lives as a combat medic. His decision to enlist without compromising his religious beliefs represents a unique form of patriotism—one that challenges the dominant wartime narrative that equates strength with violence. Doss's enlistment is not an act of defiance but a moral mission rooted in service, echoing his desire to fulfill both spiritual and national duties.

However, his religious stance soon places him in direct conflict with military structures. He is verbally abused, physically assaulted, and subjected to mock trials

as a result of his refusal to touch a weapon. This kind of opposition is representative of what Exline, Pargament, and Grubbs (2014) define as spiritual struggle—where personal beliefs are tested by external institutions and social forces that demand conformity. Rather than capitulating under pressure, Doss stands firm in his values.

The narrative of Doss's experience is also a reflection of institutional intolerance toward moral nonconformity. The military, as portrayed in the film, expects absolute obedience and homogeneity. Doss's refusal to bear arms is perceived not only as insubordination but also as a threat to the cohesion of the unit. His spiritual discipline, however, provides the inner resilience necessary to endure such pressures, marking him as a man of extraordinary conviction.

Visually, *Hacksaw Ridge* portrays this internal and external tension through cinematic techniques that emphasize silence, framing, and isolation. Doss is often depicted in solitary positions—kneeling in prayer, standing alone during training exercises, or being singled out in courtrooms. These visual choices, as observed by Westwell (2020), function as metaphors for his alienation and internal conflict. Yet, they also reveal his spiritual stillness amidst social chaos.

The courtroom scenes, in particular, highlight the extremity of Doss's position. Rather than presenting a legalistic defense, Doss calmly reaffirms his faith and his commitment to save lives. This moment in the film becomes a turning point where his inner strength is acknowledged, even if not yet accepted. It demonstrates how faith is not merely a passive belief system but an active moral framework guiding real-world decisions.

His struggle also underscores the complexity of moral agency in wartime. While others see heroism as combat-based, Doss introduces a different form—heroism through moral consistency and spiritual resolve. McAteer (2023) argues that Doss's courage is rooted not in physical aggression but in the “courage of conviction,” where the real battle is internal. His spiritual endurance becomes an act of resistance against the machinery of war.

Doss's journey reveals that religious conviction, often viewed as rigidity, can also be a source of transformation. His presence in the military forces both peers and superiors to confront their assumptions about strength, sacrifice, and duty. In this way, Doss challenges institutional norms not by rebellion, but by living out his values with unwavering integrity. His example shows how faith can not only survive but thrive in hostile environments.

Moreover, Doss's faith becomes a model of ethical clarity. In times of war, moral lines often blur; yet, Doss draws his boundary clearly—he will save lives but not take them. This ethical clarity makes him a moral compass within the film, and ultimately, within his unit. His refusal to compromise inspires others to reconsider what it means to be brave, loyal, and honorable.

In conclusion, Desmond Doss's religious conviction in *Hacksaw Ridge* functions not as a barrier, but as a bridge—between belief and action, faith and service. His struggles reveal the cost of moral integrity, especially in institutions built on conformity and control. Yet, his unwavering stance demonstrates that true strength lies not in domination, but in the ability to live out one's convictions, even when surrounded by war.

B. Social Alienation and the Formation of Moral Resilience

In *Hacksaw Ridge*, Desmond Doss's struggle is not only spiritual but also deeply social. His refusal to carry or even touch a weapon leads to immediate social rejection within the military environment. Fellow soldiers mock, bully, and isolate him, branding him as a coward and a threat to group cohesion. This alienation reflects how institutional systems often reject individuals who challenge dominant norms (Ginocchio, 2006).

The military, as portrayed in the film, is a culture rooted in conformity and aggression. In such a rigid and hierarchical setting, Doss's pacifism stands out as deviant. He becomes the object of scorn because he does not conform to the group's definition of what a "real soldier" should be. This experience mirrors what Fleeson et al. (2014) describe as character strength under pressure—where integrity is tested by widespread hostility and peer rejection.

Despite the intense pressure to conform, Doss does not retaliate. Instead, he responds with quiet perseverance and calm resistance. He neither compromises his principles nor fights back against his aggressors, demonstrating an extraordinary level of moral resilience. This is consistent with psychological theories that associate resilience with internalized values and spiritual self-regulation (Fleeson et al., 2014).

Doss's ability to endure abuse without lashing out illustrates not weakness, but strength. His nonviolent stance under provocation contrasts sharply with the toxic masculinity exhibited by his peers. Ramadhan and Ambalegin (2022) argue that Doss's communication, including his assertive yet calm responses, repositions the idea of heroism as rooted in moral resolve rather than dominance or physical

aggression.

As the narrative progresses, the consequences of Doss's integrity begin to shift. His commanding officers initially attempt to expel him from service, seeing him as a liability. However, his consistent behavior and unshaken resolve eventually draw reluctant admiration. His determination to serve—not by killing, but by healing—challenges the very definitions of bravery and usefulness in combat.

The transformation of Doss's social standing is portrayed not only through narrative events but also through cinematographic techniques. At first, he is visually marginalized: sitting alone in the barracks, standing apart during drills, or framed at the edge of group compositions. These visual cues reinforce his social rejection. Later, as respect grows, he is visually integrated into the group, a subtle but powerful signal of his moral influence (Westwell, 2020).

Doss's moral resilience inspires a re-evaluation among his fellow soldiers. After witnessing his selfless acts during the Battle of Okinawa, many of them—including those who once abused him—apologize and express admiration. This transformation highlights the power of moral consistency to shift group norms and influence social perception over time.

What makes Doss's story compelling is that he never seeks validation. He is not driven by a need to be accepted but by a desire to serve according to his conscience. His journey shows that alienation does not have to destroy one's identity. Instead, it can become the crucible for ethical growth, especially when faced with injustice.

From a psychological lens, Doss demonstrates traits of self-actualization, where

personal fulfillment is achieved not through external validation but through internal alignment with core values (Fleeson et al., 2014). This inner clarity is what allows him to persevere even when every external force urges him to conform or quit.

In sum, Doss's social alienation is essential to his character development. It sharpens his moral vision and reveals the depth of his convictions. Through rejection and ridicule, Doss becomes more resolute. His journey teaches that moral strength often emerges not from comfort or belonging, but from standing alone for what is right—until the world around him changes.

C. The Battlefield as a Moral Arena: Faith versus Duty

The ultimate test of Desmond Doss's conviction occurs on the battlefield, where the harsh realities of war confront his deepest beliefs. In the Battle of Okinawa—one of the bloodiest battles of World War II—Doss faces not only enemy fire but also an internal conflict between his faith and his duty as a soldier. The military expects him to fight, but Doss remains steadfast in his refusal to carry a weapon, even while surrounded by death and destruction (Society & Sacrifice, n.d.).

While most soldiers protect themselves and others by using firearms, Doss enters the battlefield with nothing but his medical kit and his faith. His position as a medic allows him to serve in a way that aligns with his beliefs, but it also places him in situations of extreme danger. Rather than retreat, Doss runs toward the wounded—often in open fire—to provide care. This decision illustrates what Exline, Pargament, and Grubbs (2014) describe as spiritual endurance: the unwavering application of faith in morally and physically extreme conditions.

The film emphasizes this internal battle through contrasting cinematic elements.

Scenes of chaos and intense violence are juxtaposed with moments of silence and focused effort as Doss treats wounded soldiers. Westwell (2020) explains that such techniques are used intentionally to elevate Doss's moral perspective and distinguish his actions from the violence around him. While others kill to survive, Doss saves to serve.

His personal mantra—"Lord, help me get one more"—echoed throughout the most intense rescue sequence, becomes the emotional and spiritual core of the film. It reflects the intersection of Doss's faith and sense of duty. Each repetition of this prayer symbolizes his moral choice: to preserve life while surrounded by death (McAteer, 2023). This duality becomes the essence of his identity as a soldier of compassion.

Remarkably, Doss rescues more than 75 men from the battlefield, one by one, under relentless enemy attack. Among those he saves are soldiers who once bullied and ostracized him. His ability to forgive them through action, rather than words, reinforces the strength of his moral convictions and highlights his integrity in practice (Lange, 2017). He chooses healing over revenge, mercy over anger.

Doss's presence in battle offers a stark contrast to conventional war heroism. Traditional narratives celebrate those who conquer and kill enemies. Doss, however, is celebrated for refusing to kill and for saving lives at great personal risk. His story becomes an ethical counter-narrative to the glorification of violence, and instead promotes a vision of courage grounded in humanity (Westwell, 2020).

The battlefield becomes not only a physical space of combat but also a symbolic arena where Doss's faith is repeatedly tested and affirmed. The film uses this space

to explore the tension between individual conscience and collective expectation. In choosing to act according to his beliefs, Doss challenges both the military structure and the audience's assumptions about war, masculinity, and heroism.

Moreover, Doss's conduct invites reflection on the possibility of moral agency within systems designed for violence. His success demonstrates that even within a rigid and destructive institution, ethical alternatives can emerge through individual courage. This aligns with McAteer's (2023) interpretation that Doss's strength lies not in rebellion, but in obedience to a higher moral law.

The emotional impact of Doss's battlefield decisions is heightened by the film's deliberate visual symbolism. When Doss is finally shown resting—bloodied, exhausted, yet peaceful—the lighting and composition evoke a sense of sanctity, as if affirming his spiritual triumph. This moment marks not the end of a fight, but the fulfillment of a moral mission (Westwell, 2020).

In conclusion, the battlefield in Hacksaw Ridge serves as the defining context for Doss's moral and spiritual victory. His refusal to compromise, even in life-threatening situations, transforms the chaos of war into a stage for ethical clarity. Through faith, action, and sacrifice, Doss redefines what it means to serve—showing that true heroism may lie not in violence, but in the radical choice to heal and to hold fast to one's conscience.

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis conducted in the previous chapter, it can be concluded that

Desmond Doss's character in *Hacksaw Ridge* represents a profound embodiment of moral conviction, spiritual integrity, and nonviolent heroism. His struggles—spiritual, social, and moral—are central to the narrative and carry powerful messages that challenge conventional portrayals of courage and heroism in war cinema.

First, the film portrays various forms of Desmond Doss's struggle, which originate from his deep religious beliefs as a devout Seventh-day Adventist. His refusal to bear arms creates personal and institutional conflict, making him an outsider in a military environment that demands conformity and aggression. This foundational struggle is intensified through visual and narrative elements that emphasize his isolation and moral stance.

Second, *Hacksaw Ridge* vividly illustrates the moral dilemmas and inner conflicts that Doss experiences on and off the battlefield. He is torn between military duty and spiritual conviction, particularly during the Battle of Okinawa. His decision to remain unarmed while risking his life to save others reflects his ability to uphold conscience in the face of life-threatening danger. The film uses cinematic techniques—such as silence, slow motion, and contrast—to highlight the weight of his ethical decisions.

Third, the film conveys strong moral and social messages through Doss's struggle. By saving over 75 soldiers without ever firing a weapon, Doss redefines heroism not as the ability to kill, but as the strength to heal, to forgive, and to remain faithful to one's principles. His character challenges traditional military narratives by showing that moral courage can be more transformative than physical power. Doss becomes a symbol of humanity in war, reminding viewers that compassion and faith

can endure even in the darkest of times.

In conclusion, *Hacksaw Ridge* offers more than a war story—it delivers a compelling exploration of conscience, sacrifice, and the moral cost of war. Desmond Doss’s journey from rejection to recognition reveals that true heroism lies not in the destruction of enemies, but in the preservation of one’s soul and the lives of others.

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