

The Who, Why and When of Smokejumping

Hacksaw Ridge is a popular movie based on the true story of a conscientious objector.

On April 1, 1942, Desmond Doss joined the United States Army. Three and a half years later, he stood on the White House lawn, receiving the nation's highest award for his bravery and courage under fire. He was a young Seventh-day Adventist Christian who refused to carry a gun and had not killed a single enemy soldier. His only weapons were his Bible and his faith in God. President Harry S. Truman warmly held the hand of Corporal Desmond Thomas Doss, as his citation was read to those gathered at the White House on October 12, 1945. "I'm proud of you," Truman said. "You really deserve this. I consider this a greater honor than being president."

When Pearl Harbor was attacked, Desmond was working at the Newport News Naval shipyard and could have requested a deferment. But he was willing to risk his life on the front lines in order to preserve freedom. He wanted to be an Army combat medic and assumed his classification as a conscientious objector would not require him to carry a weapon. When he was assigned to an infantry rifle company, his refusal to carry a gun caused his fellow soldiers to view him with disdain. They ostracized and bullied him.

A similar story happened at Seeley Lake.

The smoke jumping program in this region got its start in 1941 at Seeley Lake. But within a couple years their forces were depleted as practically all able-bodied men were called into WW II service.

When the war started, some men objected to war in any form and were classified as conscientious objectors. Congress allowed members of the peace churches to perform alternate service and assigned them to "work of national importance" in work camps. Some were assigned to replenish the smokejumper ranks in Seeley Lake at Camp Paxson.

During an interview with camp director Roy Wenger he gave an insight of their service here: "William James was a philosopher/psychologist at the turn of the century, and one of the most famous things he wrote was an essay on "A Moral Equivalent for War." And it was read very widely and published very widely and before World War II, we were reading that, too. Now, William James really said that psychologically what we ought to organize, what we ought to develop as a society, is some kind of an

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equivalent for war. Now, he said this equivalent should be something that would challenge the bravery

of the person, something in which, he said, you ought to... you would be able to risk your life in a good cause, and something that would be physically challenging and something that would be intellectually challenging. And he thought about various ideas that might be developed since back in those days the thing that made war attractive to a lot of young men were these very challenges. It gave them a chance to travel, to get away from home, to discipline themselves, and to see what they really could do. Well, we thought that the smokejumper project fitted the description of William James about as good as anything we'd heard, that is, here is a project that is certainly constructive, it is we could save the country's forests, or part of, we could save some of them from destruction, and it would be... require physical strength, and it would require intelligent approaches to this whole job, not only of parachuting, but fire fighting.

We knew that people had looked upon us with some suspicion. You see, the biggest problem, really, for a person who objects to using war as a means of settling disputes, is that the ordinary person thinks he's opposed to this war, and this war because of its circumstances. So in this case since Germany and Japan and Italy were the main Axis powers, people wondered if we were pro-German, pro-Italian, pro-Japanese, which really wasn't the case at all. These men were opposed to war as a means of settling disputes, no matter who it would be. So that was one problem. There was also the problem that some people felt that maybe we were merely fearful... afraid to go into combat, for example. That wasn't the case and, of course, we could... we felt that volunteering for smokejumping was one move that might dispel that idea, which was true."

These brave conscientious objectors served with distinction as smokejumpers until the soldiers returned from the war. The Forest Service dismissed all CPSers from the smokejumping in preference to veterans and moved the smoke jump center to Missoula. Very few of the COs were able to continue with the Forest Service in other areas.