

The incredible story of sergeant York

Early Life

Alvin Cullum York was born December 13, 1887, to William and Mary York of rural Pall Mall, Tennessee. The third of 11 children, York grew up in a small two-room cabin and received minimal schooling as a child due to a need to aid his father in running the family farm and hunting for food. Though his formal education was lacking, he learned to be a crack shot and an adept woodsman.

In the wake of his father's death in 1911, York, as the eldest still living in the area, was forced to aid his mother in raising his younger siblings. To support the family, he began working in railroad construction and as a logger in Harriman, Tennessee. A hard worker, York showed a devotion to promoting the welfare of his family.

Trouble and Spiritual Conversion

During this period, York became a heavy drinker and was frequently involved in bar fights. Despite pleas from his mother to improve his behavior, York persisted in drinking. This continued until the winter of 1914, when his friend Everett Delk was beaten to death during a brawl in nearby Static, Kentucky. Shaken by this incident, York attended a revival meeting led by H.H. Russell during which he concluded that he needed to change his ways or risk suffering a fate similar to Delk.

Altering his behavior, he became a member of the Church of Christ in Christian Union. A strict fundamentalist sect, the church forbade violence and preached a strict moral code that forbade drinking, dancing, and many forms of popular culture. An active member of the congregation, York met his future wife, Gracie Williams, through the church while also teaching Sunday school and singing in the choir.

World War I and Moral Confusion

With the United States' entry into World War I in April 1917, York became concerned that he would be required to serve. These worries became reality when he received his [draft registration notice](#). Consulting with his pastor, he was advised to seek conscientious objector status. On June 5, York registered for the draft as required by law, but wrote on his draft card, "Don't want to fight."

When his case was reviewed by local and state draft authorities, his request was denied as his church was not a recognized Christian sect. In addition, during this period conscientious objectors were still drafted and typically assigned non-combat roles. In November, York was drafted into the U.S. Army, and though his conscientious objector status was considered, he was sent to basic training.

A Change of Heart

Now 30 years old, York was assigned to Company G, 328th Infantry Regiment, 82nd Infantry Division and posted to Camp Gordon in Georgia. Arriving, he proved a crack shot but was seen as an oddity because he did not wish to fight. During this time, he had extensive conversations with his company commander, Captain Edward C.B. Danforth, and his battalion commander, Major G. Edward Buxton, relating to the Biblical justification for war.

A devout Christian, Buxton cited a variety of Biblical sources to counter his subordinate's concerns. Challenging York's pacifist stance, the two officers were able to convince the reluctant soldier that war

could be justified. Following a 10-day leave to visit home, York returned with a firm belief that God meant for him to fight.

In France

Traveling to Boston, York's unit sailed for Le Havre, France in May 1918 and arrived later that month after a stop in Britain. Reaching the Continent, York's division spent time along the Somme as well as at Toul, Lagny, and Marbache, where they underwent a variety of training to prepare them for combat operations along the Western Front. Promoted to corporal, York took part in the St. Mihiel offensive that September as the 82nd sought to protect the US First Army's right flank.

With the successful conclusion of fighting in that sector, the 82nd shifted northward to take part in the Meuse-Argonne Offensive. Entering the fighting on October 7 to relieve units of the 28th Infantry Division, York's unit received orders that night to advance the next morning to take Hill 223 and press on to sever the Decauville Railroad north of Chatel-Chehery. Advancing around 6 a.m. the next morning, the Americans succeeded in taking the hill.

A Tough Assignment

Moving forward from the hill, York's unit was forced to attack through a triangular valley and quickly came under German machine-gun fire on several sides from the adjacent hills. This stalled the attack as the Americans began taking heavy casualties. In an effort to eliminate the machine guns, 17 men led by Sergeant Bernard Early, including York, were ordered to work around into the German rear. Taking advantage of the brush and hilly nature of the terrain, these troops succeeded in slipping behind the German lines and advanced up one of the hills opposite the American advance.

In doing so, they overran and captured a German headquarters area and secured a large number of prisoners including a major. While Early's men began securing the prisoners, the German machine gunners up the slope turned several of their guns and opened fire on the Americans. This killed six and wounded three, including Early. This left York in command of the remaining seven men. With his men behind cover guarding the prisoners, York moved to deal with the machine guns.

A Stunning Achievement

Beginning in a prone position, he utilized the shooting skills he had honed as a boy. Picking off the German gunners, York was able to move to a standing position as he evaded enemy fire. During the course of the fight, six German soldiers emerged from their trenches and charged at York with bayonets. Running low on rifle ammunition, he drew his pistol and dropped all six before they reached him. Switching back to his rifle, he returned to sniping at the German machine guns. Believing he had killed around 20 Germans, and not wishing to kill more than necessary, he began calling for them to surrender.

Sergeant Alvin York during the action of October 8, 1918 by Frank Schoonover. Public Domain

In this, he was aided by the captured major who ordered his men to cease fighting. Rounding up the prisoners in the immediate area, York and his men had captured around 100 Germans. With the major's

assistance, York began moving the men back toward the American lines. In the process, another 30 Germans were captured.

Advancing through artillery fire, York and the surviving men delivered 132 prisoners to his battalion headquarters. This done, he and his men rejoined their unit and fought through to the Decauville Railroad. In the course of the fight, 28 Germans were killed and 35 machine guns captured. York's actions clearing the machine guns reinvigorated the 328th's assault and the regiment advanced to secure a position on the Decauville Railroad.

Medal of Honor

For his achievements, York was promoted to sergeant and awarded the Distinguished Service Cross. Remaining with his unit for the final weeks of the war, his decoration was upgraded to the Medal of Honor which he received on April 18, 1919. The award was presented to York by American Expeditionary Forces commander [General John J. Pershing](#). In addition to the Medal of Honor, York received the French Croix de Guerre and Legion of Honor, as well as the Italian Croce al Merito di Guerra. When given his French decorations by [Marshal Ferdinand Foch](#), the supreme allied commander commented, "What you did was the greatest thing ever accomplished by any soldier by any of the armies of Europe." Arriving back in the United States in late May, York was hailed as a hero and was honored with a ticker-tape parade in New York City.

Later Life

Though wooed by filmmakers and advertisers, York was eager to return home to Tennessee. Doing so, he married Gracie Williams that June. Over the next several years, the couple had 10 children, eight of whom survived infancy. A celebrity, York took part in several speaking tours and eagerly sought to improve educational opportunities for area children. This culminated with the opening of the Alvin C. York Agricultural Institute in 1926, which was taken over by the State of Tennessee in 1937.

Though York possessed some political ambitions, these largely proved fruitless. In 1941, York relented and allowed a film to be made of his life. As the conflict in Europe increased in intensity, what had first been planned as a movie about his work to educate children in Tennessee became an overt statement for intervention in World War II. Starring Gary Cooper, who would win his only Academy Award for his portrayal, *Sergeant York* proved a box office hit. Though he opposed the U.S. entry into [World War II](#) prior to [Pearl Harbor](#), York worked to found the Tennessee State Guard in 1941, serving as colonel of the 7th Regiment and became a spokesperson for the Fight for Freedom Committee, counter to Charles Lindbergh's isolationist American First committee.

With the beginning of the war, he attempted to re-enlist but was turned away due to his age and weight. Unable to serve in combat, he instead played a role in war bond and inspection tours. In the years after the war, York was plagued by financial problems and was left incapacitated by a stroke in 1954. He died on September 2, 1964, after suffering a cerebral hemorrhage.

Sources

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