

NCO HISTORY BRIEFING OUTLINE
Sergeant Alvin C. York
Medal of Honor Recipient, WWI

I. Introduction

- A. Brief Statement. The purpose of this NCO History Briefing is to acknowledge the heroism and gallantry of SGT Alvin C. York during WWI.

II. Body

- A. The York Family
- B. York's Conversion Experience
- C. A SGT's Call to Duty
- D. Recognition and Fame
- E. Life after Service

III. Closing

- A. Summary. For the past 15 minutes, I presented some aspects of SGT Alvin York's life, his family and the draft, his conversion experience, his call to duty and service in WWI, his heroic acts performed on Oct 8, 1918 in which he received the Nation's highest medal, and his life after the war.
- B. Questions. What are your questions?
- C. Concluding Statement. Despite SGT York's early party life, he is and was a NCO we can be proud of. In 1964, upon the death of this war hero, President Lyndon Johnson issued a statement calling him "A symbol of American courage and sacrifice" who "epitomized the gallantry of American fighting men and their sacrifices in behalf of freedom." He proved a man could turn his life around, become a productive citizen while serving GOD. Thank you and may GOD continue to bless America.

SERGEANT ALVIN C. YORK

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Sergeant Alvin C. York

Known as the greatest hero in World War I, Alvin C. York avoided profiting from his war record before 1939. (Birdwell) SGT York was born on December 13, 1887 in a two-room log cabin in Pall Mall, Tennessee, and raised in a rural backwater in the northern section of Fentress County. He was a semi-skilled laborer when drafted to serve in the Army in 1917. Prior to being drafted, he has never traveled more than fifty miles from his home. His parents were William and Mary Brooks York, and he was the third of 11 children. Alvin was raised on a small farm, the son of a poor blacksmith; he left school after third grade. Prior to the advent of the World War, York was employed as a day laborer on the railroad near Harriman. As a result, York had little experience with managing money and later suffered from chronic fiscal problems. (York spent money when he had it, gave it away to other people who he believed needed it, and invested poorly). He recalled: "I used to drink a lot of moonshine and I gambled all my wages away week after week." I used to stay out late at night and pick fights to see who would win. (Perry) Even with all the commotion going on around him, he knew, deep down in his heart, what he was doing was wrong.

The York family made a living by farming, supplemented by hunting. Alvin's father became an expert with his rifle and used it very effectively each Saturday afternoon to supply meat for the family and to put food on the table. He would make odd change for his pocket at the weekly town shooting matches. William York was at the top when it came to shooting rifles

and guns. This is something Alvin patterned himself to be; a excellent shooter just like his father.

As Alvin came of age, he earned the reputation of a deadly and accurate shooter, not to mention a hell raiser. Drinking and gambling in bars known as “Blind Tigers,” he was generally considered a nuisance and someone who would never amount to anything. That reputation underwent a serious change when he experienced a religious conversion in 1914. That year two significant events occurred: his best friend, Everett Delk, was killed in a bar fight in Static, Kentucky, and he attended a life changing revival conducted by H.H. Russell of the Church of Christ in Christian Union, Tennessee. Mr. Delk’s senseless death convinced Alvin York that he needed to change his ways or suffer a fate similar to his fallen comrade, which prompted him to attend the prayer meeting. (Birdwell)

Alvin joined the Church of Christ in Christian Union even though he had been raised Methodist, and in the process he convinced one of his best friends, Rosier Pile to join. Alvin later became the Worship Leader and Sunday school teacher for the church. His friend Rosier Pile went on to become the church’s pastor. The church also brought Alvin in contact with the girl who later became his wife, Gracie Williams. By most accounts, Alvin’s conversion was sincere and complete. He quit drinking, gambling, and fighting.

When the United States declared war on Germany on April 6, 1917, Alvin’s newfound faith would be tested. He received his draft notice on June 5, 1917, just six months prior to his thirtieth birthday. His friend Rosier Pile encouraged him to seek conscientious objector status. So Alvin wrote on his draft card: “Don’t want to fight.” When his case came up, it was denied

locally and at the state level review boards, because the church did not expressly prohibit killing during war. Furthermore, the church was not recognized as a legitimate Christian sect.

On the same day Alvin received his notice to register for the draft, he started a diary, which he kept faithfully throughout the war. Being called to take up arms in war caused a conflict with him. Alvin's grandfather, Uriah York, was also a Soldier in the United States Army in two wars: the Mexican War and the Civil War. The legacy of service to his country left by his grandfather provided the motivation for him to do whatever his country demanded.

Alvin also debated in his mind how to reconcile going to war, killing, and being a Christian. He came to the conclusion that GOD's law must take precedent over family tradition and the laws of mankind. His crisis of conscience was not settled until he prayed and prayed. Alvin prayed for two days and nights on the mountainside. Ultimately, he felt in his heart GOD's approval to answer the call of his country. On February 1, 1918, Private Alvin York completed basic training at Camp Gordon, Georgia. His commanding officers, Captain Danforth and Major Buxton, were so impressed with his sincerity and his honesty that they took a personal interest in him, often discussing with him the conflict that raged in his mind between his religious convictions and his patriotism. In addition to much reasoning, they cited scriptural passages from the Old and New Testaments that convinced Alvin that there are times when the sword, not just the word is the tool to use for divine justice. Minutes before the 82d Division sailed for France, the conscientious objector declared himself satisfied that he was on the right course, and proclaimed wholeheartedly to the duties of a Soldier.

The events that occurred to now, Corporal York of the "All American" 82nd Division during the foggy morning of October 8, 1918 on hill 223 in the Argonne Forest of France are unparalleled in the annals of military history. CPL York arrived in France on May 21, 1918. His unit first saw major action during the St. Mihiel drive in September 1918. By this time York had been promoted to the rank of corporal and given command of a squad. The drive was a success, and the American Army moved on to the Argonne Forest for the last major drive of the war.

CPL York's battalion received the order to advance across a valley and take two hills on the far side. The Germans, however, were dug into the hills with machine gun emplacements, and had a complete view of the valley. CPL York and the other squad leaders assigned to the left flank of the advance quickly realized that it would be impossible to take the hills from the front without additional reinforcements. They decided to attempt a sneak attack by advancing around the enemy's flank and attacking from the rear. At this point the combined forces of the squads, including CPL York's, was a total of 17 men.

Upon advancing undetected around the enemy's flank and approaching from the rear, the unit stumbled across the headquarters of the machine gun regiment. The Germans were eating breakfast at the time and were completely surprised by the Americans. Most German Soldiers promptly surrendered, however one shot by CPL York, who quickly killed the German on the first shot. The Americans disarmed and assembled the Germans, but by this time the machine gunners on the hill had been alerted of the Americans' presence. They were shooting at us from a hillside less than 30 yards away. The enemy machine guns took out nine men, including an officer, leaving CPL York in charge. It was at this point that CPL York began to make history.

CPL York told his troops to cover the captured Germans while he proceeded. Not wanting to shoot their own men, the German machine gunners had to rise up from behind their weapons for a clear sight. CPL York started shooting each time he saw a head pop up. One after another, York kept killing the Germans manning the machine guns with a single shot. He found it so easy that he started to feel sympathy for the Germans and after every few rounds; he would stop shooting and call for them to surrender. The Germans would not surrender, so he kept firing. When his rifle ran out of ammunition, he drew his Colt .45 and continued firing until he silenced all the machine guns and had killed approximately 25 gunners.

At one point, a German lieutenant and six men charged CPL York's position with fixed bayonets. With machine guns now silenced, he saw the ragged single file of six German Soldiers charging down on him. He learned while duck hunting that if he fired on the lead bird in the formation, the others would spook and scatter, but if he shot the last bird first and then moved forward, each one would be taken by surprise. As the Germans began coming at CPL York, he first shot Lieutenant Endriss, who was the farthest man away from him. CPL York then shot his next-to-last attacker and so forth until the last German Soldier was within a few arm's length of him. A single miss out of six shots would have resulted in CPL York's death. He did not miss.

CPL York proceeded to lead the captured Germans along with his seven men and the three wounded Americans back to the American lines. On the journey back, he captured three German officers, including a major who spoke English. By the time CPL York and his seven men returned to their lines, they had 132 German prisoners. CPL York was immediately promoted to Sergeant. Much later after his heroic story was officially examined and verified by affidavits, in the presence of all the officers of the 82d Division, Major General C.P. Summerall

decorated him with the Distinguished Service Cross, and said to him: "Your conduct reflects great credit not only upon the American Army, but also upon the American people. Your deeds will be recorded in the history of the Great War, and they will be an inspiration not only on your comrades, but also to the generations that will come after us. I wish to commend you publicly in the presence of the officers and soldiers of your division."(Williams)

The French awarded him the enviable Croix de Guerre. Marshall Foch told him that his was the greatest act of bravery under great stress performed by any Soldier of the Allied Armies. In addition he also received the Congressional Medal of Honor. Also awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for this battle was Sergeant Early and Corporal Cutting in 1927.

When Sergeant York returned to America he received many offers of fame and fortune, including a nationwide tour, endorsements, and movie deals. But such aspirations were not in his character, who claimed, "I...felt that to take money like that would be commercializing my uniform and Soldiering." Sergeant York wrote in his diary: "It was very nice. But I sure wanted to get back to my people where I belonged, and the little old mother and the little mountain girl who were waiting. In the midst of the crowds, dinners, and receptions I couldn't help thinking of these things."(Birdwell) Alvin York went back home to his mountains. He made his way to the same mountainside where he prayed to GOD two years earlier for guidance, and there he thanked GOD for bringing him back home safely from the war.(Birdwell)

In 1927, Sergeant York established the Alvin C. York Agricultural Institute for the boys and girls of the mountains who had few educational opportunities. York receded from the national spotlight during the 1930s, and focused his waning political aspirations on the state rather than the local level. He considered running for the U.S. Senate against the freshman

senator, Albert Gore. In the 1932 election, he changed his party affiliation and supported Herbert Hoover over Franklin D. Roosevelt because FDR promised to repeal Prohibition. (Birdwell) By 1937, he was no longer able to operate the school and it became a special part of the Tennessee public school system. In 1941, the story of Alvin York was made into a movie starring Gary Cooper, who won an Academy Award for the role. Alvin York acted as an advisor to the film. In 1954, he suffered from a stroke that would leave him bedridden for the rest of his life. By 1961, Alvin York, one of America's greatest military heroes, was partially paralyzed, almost completely blind, and virtually broke. The American Government, through the Internal Revenue Service, repaid its debt to Sergeant York by suing him for back taxes. In 1951, the Internal Revenue Service accused York of tax evasion regarding profits earned from the movie. Unfortunately, York was practically destitute in 1951. He spent the next ten years wrangling with the IRS, which led Speaker of the House Sam Rayburn and Congressman Joe L. Evins to establish the York Relief Fund to help cancel the debt. In 1961, President John F. Kennedy ordered that the matter be resolved and considered the IRS's actions in the case to be a national disgrace. The relief fund paid the IRS \$100,000 and placed \$30,000 in trust to be used in the family's best interest.(Birdwell)

Sergeant York died on September 2, 1964, prior to his death he devoted his life to improving the living conditions of the people in his home state of Tennessee. The first paved road in the area was named "The Alvin York Memorial Highway." Generations of mountain children have benefited from the educational opportunities offered by the Alvin C. York Institute. Both are fitting tributes to a man whose favorite hymn was "Onward Christian Soldiers," and who was America's greatest twentieth-century "Christian Patriot." His faith in

GOD, his modest and honorable character, and his sacrifice on behalf of his country, continue to command the utmost respect and admiration from Americans. His life serves as a model for future generations of Americans.

Work Cited

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