

**NCO Contributions to the 82d Airborne Division
History**

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There are few units in the Army with a history and reputation like that of the world renowned 82d Airborne Division. Since its activation as an infantry division in 1917 (Division Pam B-1), the 82d has been stacking a history of incredible accomplishments. Key to these accomplishments has been the actions of the soldiers, paratroopers, and non-commissioned officers (NCO) of this fine division. Two such NCOs make a lasting mark on the history of the 82d Airborne Division and the NCO corps. They are Sergeant Alvin C. York and First Sergeant Leonard A. Funk, Jr. Before we learn about them, we must get a little background history of the 82d Airborne Division.

The 82d was formed as an infantry division on August 25, 1917, in Camp Gordon, Georgia. In 1918, the division deployed to France where they participated in three major campaigns of World War I, to include the Muese-Argonne Offensive. While there, the division saw more consecutive days in combat than any other unit. Following the war, the division returned to the states and was inactivated until the outbreak of World War II. On August 15, 1942, the 82d became the Army's first airborne division. During WW II the division saw 442 days of combat, conducted four combat jumps, and participated in numerous operations including Operation Neptune, the airborne invasion of Normandy as part of Operation Overlord; Operation Market Garden; and the Battle of the Bulge. Following the German surrender, the 82d was called to occupation duty in Berlin. General George S. Patton was so impressed with the Division guard that they became known as "America's Guard of Honor" (Division Pam B-1). While the division

history continues to the present day, our two heroes made their marks during these two chapters, so let's find out more about these two model NCOs and their Medals of Honor.

Sergeant Alvin C. York was born in Pall Mall, Tennessee on December 13, 1887. He was the third of eleven children born to a poor blacksmith and his wife. Raised on a farm, Alvin York quit school after third grade. A self proclaimed wild and bad boy who used to drink a lot of moonshine and gamble his money away, his life changed following a plea from his mother during a night of drinking and fighting. Sergeant York promised his mother not to drink, curse, fight or gamble again, and he never did. In fact, he became a very devout Christian. He also met a woman, Gracie Williams, who would later become his wife (The Real Sergeant York).

Alvin was drafted into the army in June 1917, at the age of 29. He was torn because his family had a tradition of fighting for its country. However, Alvin also had a deep religious belief that it was wrong to kill a man, even in war, and attempted several times to get out of his commitment to the army. He finally prayed and decided to go fight. York shipped off to France in May 1918, as part of Company G, 328th Infantry, 82d Infantry Division. On October 8, 1918 in the Argonne Forest, Sergeant York performed the heroic acts that would earn him the Medal of Honor and place him in the great history of the 82d and the NCO corps.

The 328th Infantry was given the mission to cross a valley and take the two hills on the other side. The Germans were dug in on both hills with machine gun nests and a complete view of the valley (York). York described it as "a triangular shaped valley. So you see we were getting it from the front and both flanks. Well, the first and second waves got about halfway across the valley and then were held up by machine gun fire

from the three sides. It was awful. Our losses were very heavy.” (York) York and the other squad leaders from the left flank decided to try a sneak attack around the German’s flank to the rear. There were a total of 17 men.

The men maneuvered around the flanks, and while approaching from the rear, stumbled into the machine gun regimental headquarters. They caught the Germans by surprise and most surrendered, except one who shot at York but was immediately killed. The Americans rounded up the rest of the Germans, but the machine gun positions had been alerted by now and they turned their attention to York’s element. The machine gunners took out nine men, including the officer, leaving York in charge. According to York’s diary, he didn’t even have time to take cover. As the Germans would raise their head to sight on him, Sergeant York would shoot them. At one point, a German officer and five men jumped out of a trench and charged with fixed bayonets. York killed them also, starting from the rear so they would not take cover and shoot him. York and his men, all eight of them, captured and escorted a total of 132 Germans, including three officers, through the German lines back to the American line. Sergeant York was credited with single-handedly killing 28 Germans during the attack.

Upon his return to the states, Sergeant York went back home to Tennessee to go back to his simple life. He married his long time sweet heart and in 1927 started the Alvin C. York Agricultural Institute. In 1941, Hollywood made a movie about him and he acted as advisor for the movie. In 1952, Alvin York suffered a cerebral hemorrhage and became bedridden. On September 2, 1964, Sergeant Alvin C. York passed away. He was 76.

Far less is known of First Sergeant Leonard A. Funk, Jr. He was born on August 27, 1916 in Braddock, Pennsylvania and enlisted in the Army in June 1941 at age 21. He volunteered for airborne training and, upon completion, was assigned to C Company, 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment (PIR) (Leonard A. Funk, Jr.).

It is important to note that by the time 1SG Funk performed the feats that earned him his Medal of Honor, he had already performed two combat jumps and, just a few months earlier, received the Distinguished Service Cross for actions during Operation Market Garden. He would earn his Medal of Honor for actions in Holzheim, Belgium and go on to become America's most decorated paratrooper (Breuer 465). So let's go to Holzheim.

The date was January 29, 1945 and C Company was fighting in a driving snowstorm. First Sergeant Funk led a makeshift platoon of clerks from C Company against 15 German-occupied houses (Funk). The company captured 80 prisoners, 30 by the clerks, and detained them in a yard. Funk left four guards, because that was all that could be spared, and continued to fight. While he was gone, a German force wearing white capes similar to the Americans overpowered the guards and began to prepare the prisoners for an attack. Before long, Funk came back expecting to see his guards. Instead, he was met with a pistol jammed in his stomach and a German officer ordering him to surrender. Funk faked like he was unslinging his machine gun for surrender, but instead, whipped the gun around and started shooting. With this, the rest of the Americans grabbed their guns back and started shooting also. When it was all over with, the Americans killed 21 Germans, wounded 24, and captured the rest. For these heroic actions, First Sergeant Leonard A. Funk, Jr. was awarded the Medal of Honor.

Upon his discharge in June 1945, Leonard Funk returned to Pennsylvania and his job before the war as a clerk. He went to work for the Veterans Administration in 1947 and retired as a Division Chief in the Pittsburgh Regional Office in 1972. First Sergeant Leonard A. Funk, Jr. died of cancer on November 20, 1992. He was 96. In addition to his Medal of Honor, Funk earned the Distinguished Service Cross, Silver Star, Bronze Star, Purple Heart with 2 oak leaf clusters, along with numerous other awards and decorations. He is buried in Arlington.

These shining examples of the NCO corps went above and beyond the call of duty to look out for their fellow soldiers. Their courage and sacrifice show the true spirit of the non-commissioned officer and made stellar contributions to the history of the 82d Airborne Division and the non-commissioned officer corps.

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