

NCO HISTORY BRIEF OUTLINE

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SERGEANT ALVIN YORK

General Pershing called him “The greatest civilian Soldier” of World War I. Ferdinand Foch, the Allied Supreme Commander of the Allied Armies in France during World War I, described his exploit in the Argonne as “The greatest thing accomplished by any private Soldier of all the armies of Europe.”(Bradt, Nat. American Heritage Magazine. New York: Brown Brothters, Aug./Sept. 1981). They were talking about SGT Alvin Cullum York who was born on December 13, 1887 in a two-room log cabin in the tiny Cumberland mountain village of Pall Mall, Tennessee. Alvin was the third of eight sons and three daughters born to William and Mary York. William York trained his sons on the ways of the forest; Alvin became a competent marksman at an early age. The rifle became a tool to supply the table with food. He became such a good shot that when neighbors got together for Saturday shooting matches, they often picked him to be a judge rather than compete against him.

William York died of typhoid fever in 1911. Alvin, who’s two older brothers had married and moved away, found himself head of the household. In the summers he hired out, working a neighbor’s farm and in the winters he hauled merchandise over the rutted dirt roads. His wages and money won betting in shooting matches wasted quickly.

There were illegal drinking shacks called “blind tigers” strung along Tennessee’s border with Kentucky. Alvin often spent weekends drinking corn whiskey and looking for a fight while hanging out with his brothers and some of his friends in these seedy places. He took to carrying a revolver and a knife. He practiced shooting from a galloping mule, tossing the gun from hand to hand, and pumping bullet after bullet into

the same spot on a tree. He was known as a hell raiser and considered to be someone who would never amount to anything.

Alvin occasionally tried to mend his ways but the turning point came when two significant events occurred; Alvin's best friend died in a bar fight and a traveling preacher rode into Pall Mall. His friend's senseless death convinced him that he needed to change his ways or suffer a fate similar to his friend's. Alvin began attending the nightly revivals at the little Wolf River church held by the traveling preacher. Alvin began praying to God to forgive his sins and to guide him. On January 1, 1915, Alvin forswore smoking, drinking, gambling, cussing, and fighting. He kept this pledge for the rest of his life. Not long after, Alvin joined the Church of Christ in Christian Union. He taught Sunday school, led the choir, and began courting his fellow church member, Grace Williams. Soon he became the church's Second Elder. Alvin claimed this as the greatest victory he ever won.

Alvin heard about the war through Pastor Pile, who would read to the men on Saturday afternoons. On June 5, 1917, Alvin received his notice to register for the draft. Alvin was in turmoil, he had accepted the Bible as God's inspired word, and the Bible said, "Thou shalt not kill." He began walking the mountains at night, praying for guidance. He wanted to be a good Christian and a good American too.

Alvin talked his dilemma over with Pastor Pile and they agreed that the Sixth Commandment took priority. Alvin claimed exemption when he officially registered, writing, "I don't want to fight," and that his church forbade participation in the war. The local board refused to discharge him, on the grounds that the church was not a recognized

church. Alvin appealed the decision to the district draft board in Nashville. It turned him down. He appealed once more and again was rejected.

Alvin reported for his physical exam October 28, 1917 and on November 14, a month shy of his nineteenth birthday, found himself reporting for duty at Camp Gordon where he received training with the 21st training battalion. The unit leaders considered Private York to be a conscientious objector. Alvin admits he had two reasons why he didn't want to go to war- his own experience told him it wasn't right and the Bible was against it. Private York had other pressures, which weighed heavily on his mind; they were the call of Uncle Sam and Private York's belief in his country.

Pastor Pile and Alvin's mother continued to write the war department in Washington on Alvin's behalf. His pastor's plea was that war was against the religion of the church and his mother fought that Alvin was sole provider for the family. The war department sent paperwork for Alvin to sign and he could go home. Alvin refused to sign the paperwork and he stayed with his unit. Private York was assigned to Company G, 328th Infantry Regiment, 82nd Division.

This was the easy part for Private York; it was here that his father's training with the long rifle began to pay off. Private York became a sharpshooter and his unit's leadership began to use him to teach others the principles of marksmanship. Private York was still a soul in doubt and not sure that he could not in good conscience shoot a fellow human being.

Captain Danforth and Major Buxton of company G took a personal interest in Private York, his religious convictions and his patriotism. The officers held many different meetings with Private York but it was the last meeting that made a difference.

CPT Danforth read a passage from the book of Ezekiel that proved that the Bible did approve fighting under some circumstances. Private York stood up and with a great burden lifted from him, replied, "All right, I'm satisfied." From that night on, all doubts seemed to leave Private York as he plunged whole-heartedly into the business of becoming a soldier.

The 82nd Division left Camp Gordon on April 19, 1918 headed for Camp Upton, New York for some more training. On May 1st the unit received their orders to board ship and sail to England. After arriving in Liverpool England, the unit continued to train while waiting for orders to report to France. The orders finally came and the 82nd Division reported to France on 21 May 1918. On arrival into France, company G, 328th Infantry Regiment received British made rifles.

General Perishing wanted all American Divisions to be placed under his control but the British and French Commander-in-Chiefs wanted all American combat forces to be made available for service with the British and French Armies. General Perishing disagreed, so the allied Commander-in-Chief agreed to make a mission for the American Army. The 82nd Division became part of this mission.

Company G, 328th Infantry Regiment reported for ST. Mihiel Offensive. This was the first serious combat action Corporal York saw. The unit was in this sector from 12 September- 17 September. The 90th Division relieved 82nd Division and the 82nd Division received orders to report to First Army and started preparing for the Argonne Offensive. The mission for the Argonne Offensive was against principal German supply lines and the Sedan railroads system. Protecting this became vital for German supply lines, during the previous years the Germans constructed a strong system of field

fortifications. On the Argonne front, there were four distinct defensive lines as well as numerous intermediate positions constructed between the first three defensive lines. These defenses, together with the natural military strength of the terrain, presented a formidable obstacle to an attacking army.

The 82nd division arrived in the Argonne forest on 22 September 1918 and the Argonne Offensive commenced on 26 September. The first offensive battle of the Argonne began on the morning of 8 October 1918 when Corporal York's battalion was one of the attacking battalions. The unit's orders were to take hill 223 and drive across a narrow valley surrounded on three sides by hills fortified by German machine guns; the unit's mission was to destroy the machine guns and press on to the Decauville Railroad Station.

After crossing over hill 223 at 0610 on 8 October 1918, the attack bogged down when the unit came under fire from the front and both flanks. A hurried conference between the leadership of the company decided the only way to continue the advance was to knock out the machine gun nests on the hill to their left. A squad of four non-commissioned officers and 13 soldiers received orders to circle around the end of the hill and attack the machine gun nests from the rear.

Corporal York took matters into his own hands. Corporal York knew the only way they were going to get out of the situation was to have the German Soldiers keep their heads down. Corporal York said, "Every time a head came up I would knock it down." In the middle of the fight a German Officer and five soldiers jumped out of the trench and charged Corporal York. Corporal York only had half of clip left in his rifle so he pulled out his pistol. Corporal York shot the last man first. Corporal York continued to

shoot them in reserve order so the first man would continue to advance. Corporal York did this out of instinct because this is the way he would shoot turkeys at home.

Corporal York returned his attention back to the machine gun nest. A head would come up and Corporal York would shoot it down. After Corporal York shot a German, he would call for the German Soldiers to surrender but they would not listen. A German Major who had been captured earlier in the battle told Corporal York that he would make the German Soldiers surrender if he would not kill anymore German Soldiers. The German Major blew a whistle and all the machine gun nests surrendered to Corporal York and his men.

Corporal York lined them up two by two and marched them through German front lines back to the American lines. As Corporal York came up on a machine gun nest he would have the German Major make the Soldiers surrender. Corporal York and his men captured over 132 German Soldiers that day. Corporal York was responsible for taking out over 20 machine gun nests and killing over 25 Soldiers. Due to Corporal York and his Soldiers actions Company G, 328th Infantry Regiment was able to successfully complete their mission. Corporal York was promoted to Sergeant and received the Medal of Honor for his actions that day.

The Army Medal of Honor (MOH) was born when President Abraham Lincoln signed the bill into law on 14 July 1862. With this act, Congress created a unique award that would achieve prominence in American history like few others. To date 3,459 MOH have been awarded. Mary Edwards Walker, the only woman to receive the MOH, was awarded the MOH for her actions as a surgeon and spy during the American Civil War. The MOH was first awarded during the American Civil War and was last officially

awarded in March of 2005, posthumously, to Sergeant First Class Paul R. Smith for his actions that occurred outside of Baghdad, Iraq on 4 April 2003.

When practical, the presentation of the MOH shall be made by the President of the United States in a formal ceremony in Washington, D.C. In addition, in the case of approved recommendations, it could diminish the impact of ceremonies at which the presentation is made. Therefore, to prevent premature disclosure, the policy of the Department is not to comment on any Medal of Honor case under consideration. Accordingly, the processing of Medal of Honor recommendations shall be handled on a "FOR OFFICIAL USE ONLY" basis until the awards are announced officially or are presented.

Each Medal of Honor awardee may have their name entered on the Medal of Honor Roll. Each person whose name is placed on the Medal of Honor Roll is certified to the Department of Veterans Affairs as being entitled to receive the special pension of \$1,027 per month. As of 1 December 2004, the pension is subject to cost of living increases. Enlisted recipients of the Medal of Honor are entitled to a supplemental uniform allowance. Recipients receive special entitlements to Air transportation under the provisions of DOD Regulation 4515.13-R. Special identification cards and commissary and exchange privileges are provided for Medal of Honor recipients and their eligible dependents. Children of recipients are eligible for admission to the United States military academies without regard to the quota requirements. Recipients get a ten percent increase in retired pay under 10 U.S.C. § 3991, subject to the 75% limit on total retired pay. Those awarded the Medal after October 23, 2002 also receive a Medal of Honor Flag.

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