

**The Life and Achievements of
SGT Alvin C. York**

by:

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Outline

I. Introduction – For the next 15 minutes I will discuss the life and achievements of the Medal of Honor recipient SGT Alvin C. York. He was an outstanding NCO and role model, both as a Soldier, and as a civilian.

A. References: Jeffery J. Clark, Richard W. Stewart, John W. Elsberg, the Story of the Noncommissioned Officer Corps, Center of Military History, 1946.
Lewis P. Smith, SGT York: an American Hero, St Lewis Publishing, 1988.
John Perry, SGT York: His Life, Legend and Legacy, 1997.

B. I found an abundance of information at the LRC and I own a book on SGT York. I also found plenty of pictures on the internet of SGT York, his family, and his home.

II. Body

A. Alvin C. York Growing up – I will cover his family, his hometown of Pall Mall, Tennessee, and the significant events which changed his life. I will talk about his Draft notice and his ethical dilemma concerning the notice. I will also discuss his relationship with Miss Gracie Williams.

B. Private York to SGT York during World War I – I will talk about his first days away from his hometown, his first days as a soldier, and his training. I will discuss his abilities with his assigned weapon and his displayed discipline and natural abilities and duties as a squad leader. I will discuss his training with the British and the French, and the weapons he used. I will also cover the events, including his duties as platoon sergeant, which lead up to his heroic deeds on Oct 8, 1918.

C. Alvin York's post war life – I will discuss his trip back to the U.S. and his reception in New York. I will also cover his marriage to Miss Gracie Williams, his bible institute, and the movie about his life.

III. Closing

A. Summarize – For approximately the last 15 minutes I have discussed the life of the Medal of Honor recipient SGT Alvin C. York.

B. Question and answers

C. Conclusion - I have discussed the life and achievements of the Medal of Honor recipient Alvin C. York. He was an outstanding NCO and role model, both as a Soldier, and as a civilian.

SGT Alvin C. York

SGT Alvin C. York was an outstanding non-commissioned officer (NCO) and role model, both as a soldier, and as a civilian. Many regarded him as the greatest American hero of World War I.

Alvin C. York was born in a two-room log cabin near the Wolf River in Pall Mall, Tennessee on December 13, 1887. Alvin's father, William York, and his mother, Mary Elizabeth Brooks, were married on Christmas day in 1881. William York was 18 years old and Mary Elizabeth Brooks was 15 years old. They had eight sons and three daughters. Alvin York was the third eldest; his two older brothers were Henry and Joseph.

Alvin's dad barely made a living farming, mending wagon wheels, and shoeing horses. As a young boy, Alvin helped around the house by tending to his younger brothers and sisters, stacking firewood, and carrying water. Eventually, Alvin's father, William York, established a blacksmith shop in a cave above what became known as York spring. As Alvin got older, he assisted his father in the blacksmithing business. He also helped his father by planting tobacco, hoeing corn and plowing behind the mule. The family also supplemented their meals by hunting.

School in the Wolf River area consisted of a one-room log cabin, which did not have any textbooks and only benches for furniture. The school was only open for two or three months during the summer, except for when the crops needed harvesting. Alvin only managed to attend school for several weeks each summer for about four or five years. As he got older, he had to quit and do chores around the house.

On Saturdays, Alvin and his dad and the other men and boys of the Wolf River area spent their day competing at shooting matches. They all carried their muzzleloaders, also referred to as their hog rifles to the shooting matches. They would shoot for turkeys, sometimes tethered

behind a log at a range of 150 yards; often just the head was visible to shoot at. They would also shoot for the prize of a sheep or beef; a man could feed his family for a month or more if he won. This caused a great deal of competition and seriousness to the events. These events, combined with hunting, are where Alvin learned to become a crack shot with a rifle.

After the death of his father, Alvin had to become the head of the family. He had to put his younger brothers, John and Albert, to work on the farm. Alvin kept up with blacksmithing, repairing plows and wagons, and shoeing horses. He also developed a reputation as a drinker and a hell raiser. He would often drink, gamble and get into fights at borderline bars known as “Blind Tigers”. In 1914, Everett Delk, Alvin’s best friend, was killed in a bar fight. This convinced Alvin that he needed to change his ways and straighten out his life. He attended a revival at the Church of Christ in Christian Union on 1 January 1915 and was “saved”; this changed Alvin York’s life forever.

Alvin York had his eye on a young woman named Gracie Williams for some time; she however, would not pay him any attention because of his drinking, fighting, and hell raising. Once Alvin found Jesus, they started to see each other. Although Alvin was 13 years older than she was, they fell in love. By the spring of 1917, things started to look up for Alvin; the railroad, “The Dixie Short Route”, was coming through near Pall Mall and Alvin got a job making \$1.60 an hour for 10-hour days. One dollar and sixty cents an hour was good money for that area during that era. He was also serving as second elder and Sunday school teacher at his church, he had a 75-acre farm, he was able to hunt and go to the shooting matches each Saturday, and Gracie agreed to marry him. In June of 1917, Alvin York’s string of good luck changed; he received notice to register for the draft. America had entered World War I on April 06 1917.

Alvin York's old friend and now pastor of his church, Rosier Pile, delivered the draft notice to him. This turned out to be a tremendous ethical dilemma for him; he was now a devoted christian and did not believe in killing fellow human beings. Rosier Pile encouraged Alvin to seek conscientious objector status. Alvin wrote on the back of his draft notice "don't want to fight"; when his case came up for review, it was denied both at the local and State level. Alvin wanted to do the right thing for his country, but he also wanted to stay true to his faith. Reluctantly, he boarded the train to Camp Gordon Georgia in November of 1917 and headed to basic training where he was assigned to Company G, 2nd Battalion, 328th Infantry, 82nd Division.

Private York soon stuck out from the rest of the soldiers during marksmanship training as being an expert marksman. The drill sergeants and other cadre were amazed at his abilities with a rifle during rifle training. He also stuck out from the rest of the soldiers because he repeatedly spoke of his objection to war; this confused the drill sergeants and other cadre. Because of his objections to war, he was ordered to report to his Company Commander, CPT George Buxton. CPT Buxton was able to open a dialogue with Private York about his convictions. Besides his unusual abilities with a rifle, CPT Buxton also recognized Private York's leadership abilities and discipline. CPT Buxton tried to convince Private York that this war was justified and ordained by God. He sent Private York home on leave for two weeks to think about it. When Private York returned, he agreed to fight.

On the Morning of May 1, 1918, the soldiers of Company G, 2nd Battalion, 328th Infantry, 82nd Division, boarded a ship in Boston and linked up with a convoy in New York Harbor and set sail for Europe. The 82nd Division landed at Liverpool on May 16, 1918. They soon found themselves crossing the English Channel in route to France. Once they got to France, they traded in their American rifles for British designed rifles. Private York's Battalion received Eddystone

rifles, based on the British Enfield design, but built by Remington in Eddystone Pennsylvania. For approximately the next three months, they conducted rifle and bayonet training with the British 66th Division at Picardy and the French eighth Army at Lorraine.

The 82nd Division engaged the enemy for the first time in September in the Saint Mihiel Campaign. In October, they were tasked to support the Meuse-Argonne offensive; this is where Corporal York distinguished himself. On October 8, 1918, Corporal York and sixteen other soldiers under the charge of Sergeant Bernard Early were tasked with taking control of Decauville Railroad at the base of Hill 223. The men mistakenly found themselves behind enemy lines because they misread their map, which was written in French. As Early's platoon moved through the woods, it surprised a German force of about 25 soldiers; a firefight ensued and Early's platoon captured the Germans. Once the Germans realized the size of SGT Early's element, a machine gun nest on top the hill ordered the captured Germans to drop to the ground and started spraying the American force with machine gun fire. The machine gun fire left nine Americans dead, including SGT Bernard Early. Corporal York's duties now included platoon sergeant, and this new duty left him in Charge. CPL York and his platoon were trapped within 25 meters of enemy machine gun nests. Instead of panicking, he started firing into the machine gun nest and every time a machine gunner would lift his head to fire, CPL York killed him. After York killed at least a dozen enemy soldiers this way, six German soldiers charged him with fixed bayonets. York quickly drew on his Tennessee hunting instincts and his outstanding discipline, and began shooting the soldiers starting with the last man first. This prevented the enemy soldiers from seeing their comrades' fall and subsequently kept them from spreading out or taking cover. Once he killed all six soldiers, he turned his attention back to the machine gun nests. In between shots, he yelled for the Germans to give up; this may sound crazy, but the

German Battalion Commander did exactly that. CPL York moved his soldiers and prisoners towards the American lines encountering other German positions and forcing them to surrender. At the end of the day, he had captured 132 German prisoners and taken out 35 machine gun nests. The American intelligence officers who questioned the captured German soldiers learned how one American soldier destroyed a German Battalion armed only with a rifle and a pistol. Corporal York was promoted to Sergeant and awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. He also received the Distinguished Service Cross, the French *Croix de Guerre*, the French Legion of Honor, the *Croce did Guerra* of Italy, and the war medal of Montenegro. He had performed his duties as a platoon sergeant in a heroic and an exemplary manner.

When Alvin C. York returned from overseas and arrived in Hoboken New Jersey aboard the U.S.S. Ohioan, he waited below deck for the crowd to leave. He was finally persuaded to come out and acknowledge the crowd. He was taken to the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, where the Tennessee Society of New York had booked rooms adjacent to the presidential suite. In his room, they had placed a picture of his mother on the nightstand and had arranged for Alvin to speak to his mother on the phone back in Pall Mall. Alvin York was a simple, modest man and did not care for all of the attention he was receiving. For his actions, York was considered the greatest individual soldier of the war; he was often compared to other American icons such as Daniel Boone, Davy Crocket, and Abraham Lincoln.

When Alvin York returned home in 1919, he married Gracie Williams on June 7, 1919 in Pall Mall Tennessee. Governor Albert H. Roberts conducted the ceremony in front of 3,000 well-wishers. They spent their honeymoon in Nashville Tennessee. The Rotary Club of Tennessee built a house for Alvin York and his bride as a gift. They were also given 400 acres of prime river bottom farmland.

Broadway and various advertisers approached York and wanted his endorsement for their products; Hollywood wanted to do a film about him. He turned them all down and all chances of certain fame and fortune to pursue his own vision, he wanted to provide educational opportunities for the mountain boys and girls of Tennessee. He succeeded in opening the York Institute in Fentress county Tennessee in 1926. Throughout the 1920s, York went on speaking tours to endorse his hopes for education and raise money for his Institute. He also used his influence to improve roads, education, and employment in his home county.

In the late 1930's, the world was once again on the verge of war. Alvin York's attitude about this war, was much the same as his initial attitude towards World War I, he was against it. Just as he did World War I, he changed his opinion once he was convinced the war was just. This is part of the reason he finally endorsed a movie about himself and his heroic deeds in the First World War. In the early forties, York not only endorsed the war, he campaigned against America's stance on isolationism. He even attempted to re-enlist into the infantry, but could not due to his age and weight.

After the World War II, Alvin C. York's health began to deteriorate and in 1954, he had a stroke, which left him bedridden for the rest of his life. SGT Alvin C. York died on September 2, 1964; he was buried with full military honors in Pall Mall cemetery. He will be remembered as the greatest American hero of World War I.

Works Cited

Books:

- Jeffery J. Clark, Richard W. Stewart, and John W. Elsberg. The Story of the Noncommissioned Officer Corps, Center of Military History, 1946.
- Smith, Lewis P. SGT York: An American Hero, St. Lewis Publishing, 1988.
- Perry, John. SGT York: His Life, legend, and Legacy, 1997.

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- http://airdefense.bliss.army.mil/qao/SGT_York.htm