

Name in full *Alvin York* *York* 24  
(Given name) (Family name)

Home address *Pace Mill* *Tenn*  
(No.) (Street) (City) (State)

Date of birth *Dec* *13* *1887*  
(Month) (Day) (Year)

Are you (1) a natural born citizen, (2) a naturalized citizen, (3) an alien, (4) or have you declared your intention (specify which)? *U.S. Citizen*

Where were you born? *Pace Mill* *U.S.A.*  
(Town) (Nation)

If not a citizen, of what country are you a citizen of?

What is your present trade, occupation or office? *Blacksmith*

By whom employed? *Pace Mill*

Where employed? *Tenn*

Have you a father, mother, wife, child, under support (specify which)? *Yes*

Married or single (which)? *Single*

What military service have you performed in the last 10 years?

Do you claim exemption from draft (specify grounds)?



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A M E R I C A N C H A R A C T E R

by DAVE KOPEL

★ ★ ★ S E R G E A N T ★ ★ ★  
**YORK**

**GREAT HERO OF THE GREAT WAR**

**D**EEP IN THE Appalachian Mountains of Tennessee, in the remote Valley of the Three Forks of the Wolf, people regarded the rowdy teenager Alvin York as a nuisance. Some of them—especially his mother—hoped that Alvin might turn his life around. But nobody suspected that Alvin York would grow up to become the greatest American hero of World War I—the epitome of the American sharpshooter and of American character.

The third of 11 children, Alvin York was born in 1887 in a one-room cabin in a mountain valley just three miles south of the Kentucky line. Alvin's father was a blacksmith, whose smithy was a cave. But Mr. York liked hunting best of all. He and Alvin were often gone for days on hunting trips.

Young Alvin became an early master of the family's handmade cap and ball muzzle-loading rifle. Because every game animal was needed for meat, Alvin learned how

to kill a squirrel or a turkey with a precise shot to the head, saving the meat for eating.

As a teenager, Alvin worked on railroad crews and picked up many bad habits from the older men. He later recalled: "I read about Frank and Jesse James. I thought if Frank and Jesse could be crack shots I could too. I used to gallop my horse around a tree with a revolver and muss up that tree right smart. And I got tolerably accurate, too. I used to drink a lot of moonshine. I used to gamble my

wages away week after week. I used to stay out late at nights. I had a powerful lot of fist fights."

At age 27, the rowdy York fell in love with Gracie Williams, the teenage daughter of a deeply religious family. She insisted that he give up drinking and fighting if he intended to win her.

On Jan. 1, 1915, Alvin York made a personal commitment to Jesus and joined the Church of Christ in Christian Union (CCCU). The CCCU was a fundamentalist sect that had spun off from the Methodists during the Civil War. The church had few established doctrines, but instead required members to read the Bible and to draw their own conclusions. The church did not formally have pacifist doctrines, but one of the reasons for the split from the Methodists was that the Christian Union founders had refused to support Methodist resolutions backing the Union cause during the Civil War.

By the time that Alvin York received his draft notice in June 1917, he had read that the Bible said, "Thou shalt not kill," and had concluded—as had many other members of his church—that war-fighting was wrong. Yet because York did not belong to a denomination with formal pacifist beliefs, his request for conscientious objector status was denied. He was inducted in November 1917.

York quietly went through basic training and then in the spring of 1918 spoke to an officer about his continuing objection to war. York's sincerity was obvious and he was taken to see Major George Edward Buxton, the battalion commander. Buxton and York spent a long night

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discussing the Bible. Buxton pointed to Jesus' instruction that the apostles should carry swords (Luke 22:36); to Jesus' statement that earthly kingdoms, unlike Jesus' spiritual kingdom, do fight (John 18:36); and to the obligation for Christians to give governments the "things that are Caesar's." Finally, Buxton read York Ezekiel 33:1-6, in which God told the prophet to tell the people to listen for the watchman's trumpet, and to take warning when an armed invader comes.

York was now unsure what to think, so Buxton gave York a 10-day pass to go home and mull things over. York was promised that if he still objected to war, he would be given a non-combat assignment.

York returned home, carrying his suitcase as he walked the final

12 miles of the trip. At home, York's pastor and congregation urged him to remain an objector, and so did his mother. He went into the mountains alone, where he spent two days and one night praying for guidance.

York came down from the mountain and explained to a fellow congregant, "If some feller was to come along and bust into your house and mistreat your wife and murder your children, you'd just stand for it? You wouldn't fight?"

In May 1918, York's unit, the 82nd Infantry, shipped out to France. York was convinced "we were to be peacemakers... That was we-uns. We were to help make peace, the only way the Germans would understand."

On Oct. 2, 1918, during the

Battle of Meuse River-Argonne Forest, the first battalion of the 308th Infantry Regiment was surrounded by Germans and isolated from the rest of the American army. York's division was sent to rescue the "Lost Battalion."

Leading a patrol on the morning of Oct. 8, York and his men surrounded a German camp, which surrendered after York killed one man. As the Americans were lining up the prisoners, German machine-guns opened fire from the nearby hills. Nine Americans were instantly killed or wounded.

York recalled: "I didn't have time to dodge behind a tree or dive into the brush, I didn't even have time to kneel or lie down ... As soon as the machine guns opened fire on me, I began to exchange shots with them."

York began picking off the German machine-guns with his Enfield rifle. "In order to sight me or to swing their machine guns on me, the Germans had to show their heads above the trench, and every time I saw a head I just touched it off. All the time I kept yelling at them to come down. I didn't want to kill any more than I had to. But it was they or I, and I was giving them the best I had."

When one of York's five-round ammunition clips ran out, the Germans commenced a bayonet charge, figuring that at least one of the Germans could get to York before he could reload.

York raised his Colt .45 pistol, and "...just touched them off, too. I touched off the sixth man first, then the fifth, then the fourth, then the third, and so on. I wanted them to keep coming. I didn't want the rear ones to see me touching off the front ones. I was afraid they would drop down and pump a volley into me."

Finally, the German commander complied with York's surrender order.

Corporal Alvin York and the seven remaining able-bodied Americans faced the task of controlling several dozen German prisoners and getting them through German territory and back to the American lines. On the march back, York's group ran into two other groups of Germans and bluffed them into surrendering, too.

Returning to American lines, York brought in 128 German enlisted men and four officers. Almost single-handedly, York—with his one rifle and one pistol—had killed 25 Germans and knocked 35 German machine guns out of action. The French army commander Marshal Foch called York's feat "the greatest thing accomplished by any private soldier in all the armies in Europe."

Perhaps the Germans could have defeated York, but their morale was low, while York's was as high as could

**YORK ON SHOOTING**

*From Alvin York's Diary*

**I**n our shooting matches at home we shot at a turkey's head. We tied the turkey behind a log, and every time it bobbed up its head we let fly with those old muzzleloaders of ours. We paid 10 cents a shot, and if we hit the turkey's head we got to keep the whole turkey. This way we learn to shoot from about 60 yards. Or we would tie the turkey out in the open at 150 yards, and if you hit it above the knee or below the gills you got it. I think we had just about the best shots that ever squinted down a barrel. Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett used to shoot at these matches long ago. And Andrew Jackson used to recruit his Tennessee sharpshooters from among our mountain shooters.

We used to call our most famous matches "beeves." We would make up a beef, that is, we would drive up a beef and then each pay, say a dollar until we had made up the value of the beast. The owner got this money. And we were each allowed so many shots. The best shot got the choice of the hind quarters, the second best the other hind quarter, the third the choice of the fore quarters, the fourth the other fore quarters, and the fifth the hide and tallow.

Our matches were held in an opening in the forest, and the shooters would come in from all over the mountains, and there would be a great time. We would shoot at a mark crisscrossed on a tree. The distance was 26 yards off-hand or 40 yards prone with a rest. You had to hit that cross if you ever hoped to get all of that meat. Some of our mountaineers were such wonderful shots that they would win all five prizes and drive the beef home alive on the hoof. Shooting at squirrels is good, but busting a turkey at 150 yards—ho ho. So the Army shooting was tolerably easy for me.

be. He believed that God was with him. He later explained, "We know there are miracles, don't we? Well this was one. I was taken care of—it's the only way I can figure it."

When York later returned to the battle scene to give a tour to American General Julian Lindsey, the general asked, "York, how did you do it?" And I answered him, 'Sir, it is not man power. A higher power than man power guided and watched over me and told me what to do.' And the general bowed his head and put his hand on my shoulder and solemnly said, 'York, you are right.'

Before York returned to the United States in the spring of 1919, he had become one of the most famous men in America, thanks to a lead article in the *Saturday Evening Post*. ("The Second Elder Gives Battle," April 26, 1919, by George Patullo.)

On May 22, New York City gave York a ticker-tape parade. At first, he thought the confetti falling from the skyscrapers was snow.

"It was very nice," he wrote in his diary. "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. And I wanted to be in the mountains again and get out with hounds, and tree a coon or knock over a red fox. And in the midst of the crowds and the dinners and receptions I couldn't help thinking of these things."

When he finally got home, "I didn't do any hunting for a few days. I'm telling you I went hunting Gracie first."

Finally, "I got out with the hounds and the old muzzleloader; and I got to thinking and wondering what it was all about. And I went back to the place on the mountain where I prayed before the war and received my assurance from God that I would go and come back. And I just stayed out there and thanked that same God who had taken me through the war."

Alvin York received the Medal of

Honor and the Distinguished Service Cross, as well as medals from France, Italy and Montenegro. He was also promoted from Corporal to Sergeant.

Sergeant York absolutely refused to make money from his fame. But as the Second World War began to threaten the United States, he finally consented to the production of a biographical movie.

In the rapidly modernizing and urbanizing America of the early 1920s, Americans had looked to Sergeant York as a reminder of their traditional rural virtues and simplicity. In 1941, with global war approaching, Americans looked to the movie "Sergeant York" to martial courage in the face of danger.

Alvin York had insisted that the movie's lead role be given to Gary Cooper. It was an astute choice, as Cooper's performance won the Academy Award for Best Actor.

People who knew Sergeant York's real-life story were surprised, though, that the movie showed York using a Luger pistol rather than a Colt; the producers could not figure out how to make a Colt fire blanks.

When Sergeant Alvin York passed away in 1964, President Johnson told the nation, "As the citizen-soldier hero of the American Expeditionary Forces, he epitomized the gallantry of American fighting men and their sacrifices in behalf of freedom."

Two years later, President Johnson again recalled Sergeant York: "... the majority of our countrymen still agree with the words that a great American hero spoke a long time ago. It was Sergeant Alvin York who once said, 'Liberty and freedom and democracy are so very precious that you do not fight to win them once and then stop. You do not do that. Liberty and freedom and democracy are prizes that are awarded only to those people who fight to win them and then keep on fighting eternally to hold them.'" **TF**