



York nervously poses for the camera on the deck of the S.S. Ohioan after docking in Hoboken, New Jersey on May 22, 1919. York had no idea that the April 1919 piece in the Saturday Evening Post about his battle exploits had made him a national hero. York was officially welcomed by the Tennessee Society and whisked away to be feted in New York City and Washington, DC. Source: AHEC.

SERVING GOD OR CAESAR: SERGEANT YORK & THE MORALITY OF WAR

COLONEL DOUGLAS MASTRIANO

...there was one guy in my outfit who was a conscientious objector—but once he was in the thick of battle, he fought like a true American and almost captured the whole d-nmed German Army single-handed. His name was Alvin York and he was a hero.

Otis Merrithew (aka William B. Cutting)

October 21, 1965

On October 8, 1918, the American 82nd Division was preparing to attack the heavily defended Argonne Forest in France. The Argonne was seized by the Imperial German Army in late 1914 and was developed into a defensive network that exploited the rough terrain and thick forest. To compound matters, the week prior a battalion size element of 590 Americans broke through the German lines. This unit, later known as the Lost Battalion, was surrounded for five days and threatened with annihilation. They had to be saved. In desperation, the 82nd American Division was ordered to advance into the forest to force the Germans to give up their siege of the Lost Battalion.

As the 82nd prepared the assault, the Germans fired gas-filled artillery rounds into the ranks of the Americans, making their climb towards the Argonne all the more difficult. Among the advancing soldiers was Corporal Alvin C. York, one of the unit's few practicing Christians. Most of the officers had strong Christian faith, but of the soldiers in York's platoon, only he and another corporal, Murray Savage, were noted as trying to live out their beliefs. York and Savage would be seen studying the Bible and praying together instead of

frequenting the French cafes behind the lines or chasing mademoiselles. Because of this, neither Savage nor York fit in well with their fellow soldiers and often felt isolated or alone.

This isolation was exacerbated by the tribal nature of the 82nd. The unit was called the "All American Division" as it had soldiers from 46 of the then 48 states.¹ This mix resulted in regional and ethnic "tribes" forming within the division. In York's case, the Italians, Irish, Greeks, Russian, Poles, etc., tended to spend time with their likeminded people group. Being Christians not from one of these ethnic groups and not having anything in common with the other soldiers made military service daunting for York and Savage.

As the 82nd Division prepared to "go over the top" and hit the Germans, York was heard muttering that "he was willing to die for his country, but not to kill for his country"—not something any soldier wanted to hear from one of his squad leaders. The attack was to commence at 6:00 am with a ten-minute artillery barrage focused against the German positions. At 6:10 am, the Americans would attack. However, the barrage never arrived.

The unit leader, Major Tillman, directed that the men would attack with or without the artillery. At 6:10 am, York's unit began its advance into the Argonne. Initially, things seemed to go well, but the Germans had set a trap.

The day before, the German commander of 2nd Württemberg Landwehr Division, General Anton Franke, read reports of the American units' movement and rightly assessed where the attack would occur. General Franke had two of his regiments, the 120th and 125th Württemberg Landwehr, create a kill zone just inside the forest. The Americans would be allowed to enter the kill zone with little resistance, but once in it they would be attacked by rifleman and machine guns from three sides. General Franke also received reinforcements from the 45th Prussian Reserve Division, who would join his Württembergers in a large counterattack to eliminate the American attack and then drive them out of the forest. Things could not be worse for the Americans.

Without supporting artillery fire, the Americans swept into the Argonne Forest, straight into General Frank's kill zone, and hit a wall of fire, which stopped the attack. York described the scene in his diary, saying:

The Germans met our charge across the valley with a regular sleet storm of bullets. I'm a-telling you that-there valley was a death trap. It was a triangular-shaped valley with steep ridges covered with brush, and swarming with machine guns on all sides. I guess our two waves got about halfway across and then jes couldn't get no further nohow. The Germans done got us and they done got us right smart. They jes stopped us in our tracks. Their machine guns were up there on the heights overlooking us and well hidden, and we couldn't tell for certain where the terrible heavy fire was coming from. It 'most seemed as though it was coming from everywhere.

The American attack literally faded away. To make matters worse, German artillery fire began to rip through the floundering assault. In the midst of the horror, Platoon Sergeant



Harry Parsons ordered Sergeant Early and Corporals York, Savage, and Cutting to gather up their men and find a way behind the German lines. This group of 17 men saw a deep cut in a ridge to their south and began moving towards it, putting them under the barrels of five German machine guns. As the German gunners prepared to open fire, the belated American artillery fire providentially erupted on them, enabling York and the other Americans to successfully get behind the German lines.

The Americans wound about a mile behind the lines when they encountered two German soldiers carrying large water tins. Upon seeing the Americans, the Germans dropped the tins



This photo was taken outside of Varennes-en-Argonne and is confirmed to be of York's group of prisoners. The three German officers in the front of the formation each played a central role in the October 8 battle. At left is German Lieutenant Paul Vollmer, the commander of 1st Battalion, 120th Württemberg Regiment, who personally surrendered his unit to York after losing many men and seeing his friend Fritz Endriss fall in combat. The German officer in the center is Lieutenant Max Thoma, commander of the 7th Bavarian Mining Company, who refused to surrender unless Vollmer accept responsibility. To the right is German Lieutenant Paul Lipp, who commanded the 125th Württemberg machine gun that killed or wounded half of the Americans with York. The American in the center of the photo, just behind the German officers may be Alvin York. Source: AHEC.

and ran straight back to their headquarters to report the breach to their commander. However, the 17 Americans pursued them, surprising a mass of 70 German soldiers. The Germans were so shocked to see the Americans that they surrendered. The 17 Americans struggled to push the throng of 70 German prisoners into a manageable mass. Suddenly, the word “*runter*” was yelled, with the Germans all falling to the ground. This was quickly followed by the rat-a-tat-tat of a German MG 08/15 machine gun that killed

six of the Americans and wounded three. The surviving Americans fell to the ground hoping to survive the next burst of German machine gun fire.

The scene was utter chaos. German machine gun fire sprayed over the heads of the surviving eight Americans and 70 German prisoners, all huddled on the low ground. In between bursts from the German machine gun, the Americans yelled to each other to determine, who was left alive. Of the leaders

Form 1		REGISTRATION CARD		No. 27
1	Name in full	Alvin C. York	York	Age in yrs. 29
2	Home address	Pale Male	Tenn	
3	Date of birth	Dec	13	1887
4	Are you (1) a natural-born citizen, (2) a naturalized citizen, (3) an alien, (4) or have you declared your intention (specify which)?	A. Natural Born		
5	Where were you born?	Pale Male	Tenn	U.S.A.
6	If not a citizen, of what country are you a citizen or subject?			
7	What is your present trade, occupation, or office?	Labor on farm		
8	By whom employed?	P.C. Rice		
9	Where employed?	Pale Male Tenn		
10	Have you a father, mother, wife, child under 12, or sister or brother under 12, solely dependent on you for support (specify which)?	Mother, Bessie, sick		
11	Married or single (which)?	Single	Race (specify which)?	Cauc
12	What military service have you had? Rank	none		
	years	Nation or State		
	Do you claim exemption from draft (specify grounds)?	Yes, Don't want to fight		
I affirm that I have verified above answers and that they are true.				
				Alvin C. York (Signature or mark)

Sergeant York Draft Registration Card. Block 12 is where he asked for exemption. Source: National Archives.

Early, Cutting, York, and Savage, only York was not killed or wounded. The burden of command had passed to him. As an outspoken conscience objector, what would York do?

York's journey to conscience objection began in the hills of Pall Mall, Tennessee, in 1911 when his father died. With the passing of his dad, York became responsible for running the family farm and blacksmith shop while providing for his widowed mom and younger siblings. The pressure was too much for him, so he sought a way to escape. Fortunately for York, a place to do so was just a few miles to the north along the Tennessee-Kentucky border.

Enterprising bootleggers found a way to sell their unregulated alcoholic beverages to the populace by building their bars (called blind-tigers) on the state border, with the building half in Tennessee and half in Kentucky. Whenever local law enforcement officials arrived, the alcohol and those in the blind-tiger simply staggered to the opposite half of the building and into the other state. Beyond the risk of consuming unregulated

alcohol, the blind-tigers were renowned for knife fights, shootouts, brutal fist fights, and drunken brawls. It was not uncommon for people to be killed during the busy weekend drinking binges. Such was the environment where Alvin York spent his weekends in various stages of drunkenness.

York's mom was terribly worried about him. He was raised with strong Christian values, but had rejected these in exchange for his weekend drinking binges. He refused to speak with his pastor, or listen to the counsel of Christian family or friends. To many, York was a good-for-nothing drunk and would never make any positive contribution to life. All hope seemed lost for him.

However, things began to change when a neighbor, Gracie Williams, caught his attention. The problem was that she and her family were all practicing Christians. This was particularly true for Gracie's father, Francis Asbury Williams, who was deeply devout and a leader in the local church. There was no way that he would tolerate Gracie spending time with Alvin York. The only place where they could see each other was at church. With the sole desire to spend time with Gracie, York became a regular churchgoer.

Things forever changed for York on New Year's Day 1915 during a special church service. On that day, a preacher from Indiana preached a sermon that gripped York's heart. The preacher, Reverend Russel, walked through the basic Gospel message that proclaimed the sinfulness of man and the need for redemption. Reverend Russel followed up the bad news with the Good News and explained the saving grace offered through a relationship with Jesus Christ. An altar call was given for those who wanted to turn from their sins and accept Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior. York would later say that it was like lightning hit his soul. He went forward and prayed. Reflecting on this he wrote:

I found out the truth of what the Bible says: "There is more rejoicing over one sinner that repenteth than over ninety-nine just persons that need no repentance." I truly

felt as though I had been borned again. I felt that great power which the Bible talks about and which all sinners feel when they have found salvation, I felt in my soul like the stormy waters must have felt when the Master said, "Peace, be still." I used to walk out in the night under the stars and kinder linger on the hillside, and I sorter wanted to put my arms around them-there hills. They were at peace and so was the world and so was I.²

The change in York's life was complete. He stopped going to the blind-tigers, became a leader in his church, taught choir and Sunday school, and even preached sermons as the assistant pastor. For York, the new life was not easy. He said that the temptation to go back to the blind-tigers was hard to overcome. Of this time, York noted:

And the more I thought the more I kinder figured that all of my trials and tribulations in the war had been to prepare me for doing just this work in the mountains. All of my suffering in having to go and kill were to teach me to value human lives. All the temptations I done went through were to strengthen my character. All the associations with my buddies were to help me understand and love my brother man. All of the pains I done seed and went through were to help and prepare me.³

This was the most important epoch in the York story. As he resisted the temptation to "cuss, chase women and drink," he in turn built his moral character, making him brave and heroic in his heart, in his soul. He said of this:

Sometimes Everett or Marion or some of the other boys would drop around and tell me they were putting on another party and invite me to join them. Then it was that I was most sorely tempted. I prayed most awful hard and got a good hold on myself and didn't go. Each time I refused it was so much easier next time; and every day it became easier. In a few months I got them there bad things out of my mind.⁴

This was also the time when York immersed himself in the Bible. He knew that the Bible was God's Word and he should follow it in

every aspect of his life. Those who once viewed him as a good-for-nothing drunkard were astounded at the change in his life. Over the next two years, York became a respected leader in his community, later saying:

And that is the greatest victory I ever won. It's much harder to whip yourself than to whip the other fellow, I'm a-telling you, and I ought to know because I done both. It was much harder for me to win the great victory over myself than to win it over those German machine guns in the Argonne Forest. And I was able to do it because God showed me the light, and I done followed it.⁵

However, his world turned upside down in 1917 when the United States entered World War I. Like so many other Americans, York was drafted into the Army. The idea of going to war and killing Germans was something he could not imagine. As far as York was concerned, when the Bible said, "Thou shall not murder," a Christian could not kill another human for any reason. Having barely a third-grade education, York did not go to the original Hebrew to discern the difference between kill and murder. However, he found himself faced with either fidelity to his Christian convictions or to the demands of his government. He doubted he could both follow God's Word and join the Army. On block 12 of his draft card, where it asked, "Do you claim exemption from draft (specify reason)," he wrote, "Yes, Don't want to fight."

In its rush to prepare for war, one of the areas that the United States was least prepared for was what to do with conscientious objectors. Those who refused to do anything to support the war were often treated brutally and even imprisoned. York's request for military exemption was denied by the county board, and he appealed to the state board. The state board denied this appeal. A subsequent appeal to the federal board was also denied. York had to serve despite his sincerely held beliefs. He was filled with doubt and confusion and prayed for God's intervention, later explaining:

I wanted to follow both. But I couldn't. They were opposite. And I couldn't reconcile them nohow in my soul. I wanted to

do what was right. I wanted to be a good Christian and a good American too. I had always figured that the two were sort of connected. And now I was beginning to find out that they were kinder opposed to each other. If I went away to war and fought and killed, according to my reading of the Bible, I weren't a good Christian, And if I didn't go to war and do these things, according to Uncle Sam, I weren't a good American... I wuz sorter mussed up inside woser'n ever. I thought that the word of God would prevail against all of the laws of man and of nations.⁶

With his appeals to avoid the draft denied, York joined the United States Army on November 14, 1917, and he would eventually be assigned to the 82nd Division at Camp Gordon, Georgia. York determined that it would be best if he did not make his conscientious objections known and that he would endeavor to be the best soldier he could. He would write:

I jes went to that old camp and said nothing. I did everything I was told to do. I never once disobeyed an order. I never once raised my voice in complaint, but I was sick at heart jes the same, heard the boys around me talking about what fun would be to go overseas and fight in the trenches I heard them telling of how many Germans they were going to kill if ever they got a chance. I heard all sorts of things about the glory of war. But I couldn't see it like they seed it no-how. I prayed and prayed that God would show me His blessed will.⁷

Being a hard working soldier who did not complain and being the best shot in the unit made him stand out. Furthermore, Alvin York did not spend his free time in the neighboring town of Augusta, Georgia, getting drunk and chasing women. Instead, he attended Bible classes, sang in the chapel choir, and lived a quiet and clean life. This made York stand out further as a model soldier. Because of this, his company commander, Captain Danforth, and battalion commander, Major Buxton, offered Private Alvin York promotion to corporal.

York had been struggling with reconciling his faith with military service and still was

conflicted. He simply could not kill. With the offer of a promotion, Alvin nervously expressed his misgivings to Captain Danforth about being in the Army. Danforth listened intently to York and said that he would arrange a meeting with Major Buxton to figure out a way to sort out this dilemma.

York was apprehensive about meeting with both Captain Danforth and Major Buxton. When the time came, he was immediately put at ease by Buxton:

The major was very friendly-like; he always was with us boys. He told us to sit down. He said he didn't want to discuss this question as a battalion commander discussing it with an officer and a private. He wanted us to discuss it as three American citizens interested in a common cause. He said he respected any honest religious conviction and would be glad to discuss things as man to man.⁸

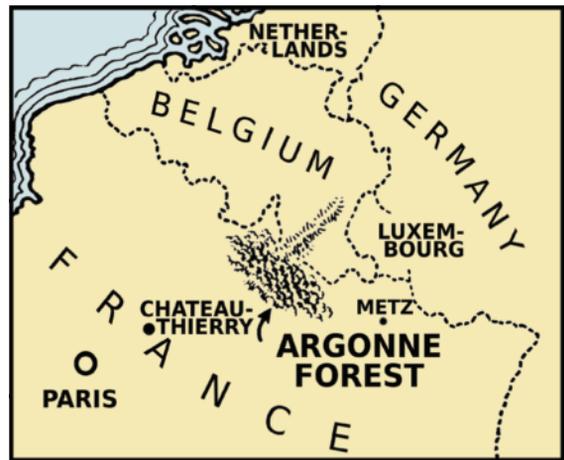
Providentially, York could not have been assigned to a better leadership team. Both Danforth and Buxton were outspoken Christians who knew their Bible well. The discussion began with Danforth and Buxton quoting Bible verses that supported a person serving in the military. York replied with verses that supported pacifism. The tone of the discourse was perfect for Alvin, who said, "We didn't get annoyed or angry or even raise our voice. We jes examined the old Bible and whenever I would bring up a passage opposed to war, Major Buxton would bring up another which sorter favoured war. I believed the Lord was in that room. I seemed somehow to feel His presence there."⁹ Yet, it seemed as though the two sides were at an impasse. Finally, Captain Danforth opened up his Bible and read a portion of Ezekiel 33:

Again the word of the LORD came unto me, saying, Son of man, speak to the children of thy people, and say unto them, When I bring the sword upon a land, if the people of the land take a man of their coasts, and set him for their watchman: If when he seeth the sword come upon the land, he blow the trumpet, and warn the people; Then whosoever heareth the sound of the trumpet, and taketh not warning; if the

sword come, and take him away, his blood shall be upon his own head. He heard the sound of the trumpet, and took not warning; his blood shall be upon him. But he that taketh warning shall deliver his soul. But if the watchman see the sword come, and blow not the trumpet, and the people be not warned; if the sword come, and take any person from among them, he is taken away in his iniquity; but his blood will I require at the watchman's hand. So thou, O son of man, I have set thee a watchman unto the house of Israel; therefore thou shalt hear the word at my mouth, and warn them from me. When I say unto the wicked, O wicked man, thou shalt surely die; if thou dost not speak to warn the wicked from his way, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood will I require at thine hand. Nevertheless, if thou warn the wicked of his way to turn from it; if he do not turn from his way, he shall die in his iniquity; but thou hast delivered thy soul.¹⁰

Danforth nailed it. York reflected on this scripture and at that moment knew that he *could* serve in the military as a “watchman on the wall.” But he was not convinced that he could kill for his country. Sadly, word spread across the unit that York was a conscientious objector. Several members of his squad called him a coward and someone using religion to get out from doing his duty. He found himself ostracized and continually mocked by his fellow soldiers. As the unit traveled across the Atlantic, through England, and into France, his one real friend remained Murray Savage. Their friendship was close: in addition to praying and studying the Bible together, they kept each other accountable in avoiding the ladies and wine in France.

Fast forward and return to York's crisis in the Argonne Forest. When those machine guns fired over the 70 prostrate Germans and into the American patrol only thirty feet away, the first burst ripped into Savage, tearing him into pieces. York fell to the ground to avoid the next deadly salvo. As the Americans sounded off, it was clear that York was the only leader left alive or able to fight. Laying in the meadow with his only friend and five others he knew well dead, along with three other Americans severely wounded, and with



him now in charge, York pondered what to do. His thoughts were accompanied by neither rage nor hate, but rather were focused simply on the fact that he must stop the killing of his brothers. In that instant York changed from a conscientious objector to a warrior. Inaction would only result in further American death and destruction. As both a watchman on the wall and a Christian leader, it was his responsibility to save his friend's lives. Everything suddenly became clear for York in that moment, and the debate of whether a Christian could ever morally kill ended.

As bullets passed over his head, York charged up the hill to a position that outflanked the German machine gun, as well as a group of infantry whom he discovered were also shooting at the pinned Americans. Together, there were 19 enemy soldiers in front of York. Without wasting a moment, York opened fire, pausing long enough to shout to the Germans to surrender. However, the enemy refused to lay down their arms, and York ended up killing all 19 of them. Seeing more German soldiers coming towards him from further up the hill, and needing to return to his men, York ran back down the hill, only to be charged by a German officer (Lieutenant Fritz Endriss) and a second group of enemy soldiers armed with their bayonets. York pulled out his own Colt Automatic Pistol and fought off this assault, shooting Endriss in the abdomen, dropping him to the ground. York redirected his fire toward the other Germans reinforcements.

Meanwhile, Endriss was still alive, in agony, and begging for help. Included in the throng

of the original 70 Germans who had surrendered and were continuing to hug the ground to avoid the crossfire, was Lieutenant Paul Vollmer, who had been friends with Endriss for more than a decade. Desperate to save his friend, Vollmer cautiously stood up and walked over to York, who would recount the exchange:

Vollmer: "English?"
York: "No, not English."
Vollmer: "What?"
York: "American."
Vollmer: "Good Lord! If you won't shoot any more I will make them give up."¹¹

York told him to do it, whereupon Vollmer blew a whistle, and the Germans above came down the hill with their arms up. The skirmish was over. In the end, this good-for-nothing drunk from Pall Mall, Tennessee, this conscientious objector, had killed 25 enemy soldiers and captured 132. His action saved his unit from certain defeat and forced the German Army to retreat from their Argonne Forest fortress. York was awarded the Medal of Honor for this action, for which he always gave God the credit. When one of his officers, Brigadier General Julian Lindsay, asked how managed this extraordinary task, York later recalled responding, "It was not man-power but it was divine power that saved me. I told him that before I went to war I prayed to God and He done gave me my assurance that so long as I believed in Him not one hair of my head would be harmed; and even in front of them-there machine guns He knowed I believed in Him."¹²

The morality of Christians serving in the military is a debate that stretches across two millennia. There are no easy answers on whether a Christian can kill for his country. The Just War ethic as offered by Augustine of Hippo, although a thousand years old, provides a good road map and strong reasons for when and why a follower of Jesus Christ can kill. Yet, in all cases it seems to be a personal and individual decision. Such was the case for Alvin York. However, it took the reality of war, surrounded by the death

and the threat of death of those he loved, to bring the issue to a clear and abrupt finality. Perhaps the comfort and security that most Americans enjoy today gives us the luxury to debate and reflect on such matters. Yet, for York, when life itself was at stake, he knew what he ought do. P

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(Endnotes)

- 1 American Battle Monuments Commission, 82d Division: Summary of Operations in the World War, (Washington, DC, Government Printing Office; 1944),1-2; G. Edward Buxton, Official History of 82nd Division American Expeditionary Forces, 1917-1919, (Indianapolis: BobbsMerrill; 1920), 1-3.
- 2 York, Sergeant York, 144, 147.
- 3 York, 304-305.
- 4 York, Sergeant York, 146.
- 5 York, Sergeant York, 145.
- 6 York, 155, 161.
- 7 York, 166-167.
- 8 Skeyhill, 160-163; York, 169-170.
- 9 York, 171.
- 10 Pattullo, 4. Skeyhill, Sergeant York: Last of the Long Hunters, 163-164. There is a conflict in the sources as to whom read this to York. The 1928 York/Skeyhill book credits Buxton with this. As Danforth was interviewed for Pattullo's article, it is more likely that he read Ezekiel 33.
- 11 York, 229.
- 12 York, 278.