The Legend of Sergeant York

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Corporal Alvin York began the morning of October 8, 1918, as a fairly ordinary draftee soldier in “G” Company, 328th Infantry Regiment, 82nd Division, American Expeditionary Force. He was a humble, born-again Christian, farmer, and hunter from the Tennessee mountains, a remarkably good shot, and a one-time conscientious objector. By the afternoon of October 8, he was well on his way into the realm of warrior legend.

York’s unit was engaged in the great Meuse-Argonne Offensive, the largest and final American offensive of the war. The Meuse-Argonne lasted from September 26, 1918 until the end of the war on November 11. Approximately 1.2 million Americans participated, of whom about 27,000 were killed and 96,000 were wounded, gassed or otherwise disabled. The left flank of the offensive faced German defenses in the Argonne Forest, a dense, dark woodland covering a range of steep hills with narrow valleys. On October 8 the 328th Infantry Regiment of the 82nd attacked westward, over open ground, toward the eastern edge of the Argonne Forest. The German defenders held high ground inside the forest both straight ahead (west), and to the left flank (south) of the 328th attack. Numerous German machineguns firing from both directions inflicted heavy casualties on the Americans, and the attackers were pinned down several hundred meters short of the forest. A patrol of men from “G” Company was quickly organized and tasked with neutralizing the machineguns firing from a wooded ridge to the south. The patrol was commanded by Sergeant Bernard Early, and totaled 17 men, including Alvin York. Early led his men to the rear, away from the attack, and then turned south and west. They managed to infiltrate into the Argonne Forest at a point that was not defended by the Germans, and they proceeded deep into the German rear, intending to attack the machineguns from behind. Early’s patrol climbed down a steep slope into a narrow, overgrown valley bisected by a small creek; the valley pointed north, toward the 328th attack. Moving up the valley toward the sound of the German machineguns, the Americans suddenly encountered a group of several dozen Germans resting in the valley. The Germans were completely surprised and quickly surrendered, and Early arranged his outnumbered men to form a perimeter around the POWs. Suddenly a heavy fire opened from additional Germans positioned up on the eastern slope—six Americans were killed, three others were wounded, including Early. The survivors were pinned down in the valley, along with their prisoners.

Corporal Alvin York was now in command of the remains of the Early patrol, but he did his own fighting. From his position between the POWs and the enemy force on the hillside above him, York began shooting individual Germans in the head with his rifle, whenever they attempted to take aim at himself or other Americans. While York was heavily outgunned, the Germans were actually in a difficult position, as York’s location at the base of the steep slope required them to expose themselves in order to fire effectively. They were not able to simply blaze away with rifles and machineguns in York’s general direction, as he was positioned in front of a large mass of prone POWs. Recognizing the problem, a German officer led five men in a rush to kill York while he was reloading his rifle. York shot all six Germans with his .45 automatic pistol. Ultimately, the surviving Germans on the slope joined the POWs in the valley. York organized the prisoners into a column and marched them out, capturing still more groups before he reached friendly positions. The official prisoner total was 132, and York was credited with killing 25 Germans. The 328th attack, meanwhile, was successful.

York was promoted to Sergeant, but much more was to come. An official investigation of the action in the valley led to a Medal of Honor and a blaze of publicity in 1919. “Sergeant York” was a national hero and a household name in the years after the Great War. In 1941, Warner Brothers released “Sergeant York,” starring Gary Cooper, a popular patriotic morality tale with only tenuous connections to the facts. The movie revived York’s fame, and he was still well known among Americans when he died in 1964. Like the Great War itself, Alvin York has since begun the long slide into oblivion, forgotten or only vaguely recognized by most Americans today. His legend, at least, was one well-grounded in reality. He was real, and he really did what they say he did in that remote ravine in the Argonne Forest.