Memorial Day 2009: Alvin C. York: Reluctant Hero. The Meuse-Argonne Offensive: The Fight for Hill 223; the Reluctant Hero; Addendum: Medal of Honor Citation

Company G and the rest of the 82nd Division had penetrated to the northern section of the forest. They spent the day of October 7 lying alongside the road in the rain and mud, watching the 1st Division battle for what the field maps designated as Hill 223. This hill and its neighboring villages were near the edge of the Argonne, along the Aire River. To the west of the hill ran the narrow gauge Decauville \dä-kō-vēl\ Railroad, which the Germans depended on both to supply this stretch of the front and to take iron ore and casualties out. The American objective was to advance down the western slope of Hill 223, cross the plain at its base, and take the Decauville line. (pp. 6-7)

Once Hill 223 had been secured by the 1st Battalion, Company G's commander, Captain E. C. B. Danforth, received orders to advance to a line just behind the crest of the hill and use it as a jumping off point for an attack on the railroad. The orders, issued at 9:45 P.M. on October 7 charged the battalion with "the duty of driving hard straight west to cross the railroad at its nearest point." The H-hour was set at 6:00 A.M., to give the artillery more time to get into position. (p. 7)

The 2nd Battalion saw 6:00 A.M. come and go without a sound from the artillery. An extra hour had evidently not been time enough to move the guns into place.

At 6:10, without waiting any longer for artillery support, the 2nd Battalion began its charge over the hill under cover of the swirling mist, trees, and heavy undergrowth. As soon as the enemy troops detected the advance, they opened fire with deadly result. From Hill 223 to the Decauville line was a mile and a quarter, an easy half-mile walk. To defend their lifeline, the Germans would make the Americans pay for every inch. Machine gun emplacements across the plain and on flanking hillsides had a clear field of fire on the advancing soldiers from the point where they crested the hill, all the way down the slope, and across the plain to the railroad.

The first wave of Americans ran headlong into a wall of German lead. Hundreds died within minutes.

Neither the 28th Division on their left, nor the 327th Infantry on their right had been able to advance, and the 328th soon found itself completely pinned down and alone. G Company in particular was subjected to withering machine gun fire from the Germans on three sides and at last found its forward progress stopped entirely. (p. 8)

Company G was at the left base of the salient, most exposed to enemy pressure and best positioned to render assistance. Unless the Spandaus \shpän'-daü\ [MG08/15s, the most common German machine guns] protecting the plain between the foot of Hill 223 and the Decauville Railroad could be silenced, allowing the center and left units in the line to advance, the 1st Division would be forced to retreat or face capture and destruction. (pp. 8-9)

As the fog lifted, Captain Danforth lay in the muddy underbrush considering Company G's choices. The captain decided to send a detachment of men from his 1st Platoon around the left flank of the Company G line, hoping they could distract the machine gunners. The platoon sergeant was Harry Parsons [Pat Flaherty]. Parsons in turn selected three squads for the mission under the command of Corporal Bernard Early [Joe Sawyer]. Early's squad leaders were Corporals William C. Cutting [Jack Pennick], Murray Savage [Lane Chandler], and Alvin C. York.

With Early in the lead, the men dropped back from the firing line and then hunched single file around the left flank and into German territory. York, Early, and others thought they should keep moving and attack from the rear.

Suddenly, out of the thick brush and remnants of fog, two German stretcher bearers appeared. The Americans shouted for them to surrender; one stopped but the other continued running. (p. 9)

Fearful the medics would sound the alarm, the seventeen Americans took off in pursuit. Jumping a little stream, the men stumbled onto an encampment of twenty or thirty German soldiers. Officers, enlisted men, orderlies, runners, and stretcher bearers looked up from their breakfast to find themselves, though well behind the front, completely surrounded. (pp. 9-10)

These were members of the Prussian 210th Infantry, 45th Reserve Division, who had been sent up as reinforcements but had not yet engaged in combat.

As the Americans burst into their circle, the Germans made no resistance. Dropping their plates and putting up their hands, they shouted, "*Kamerad!*" After only a few shots, Early ordered his men to cease firing and take the Germans prisoners. As he formed his POWs into a line, a German officer shouted a command. In response, the machine gunners along the front swiveled their weapons around and started firing upon the Americans.

Corporal Savage, who had been York's bunkmate, died instantly, peppered with so many rounds that his uniform was almost torn off. Early survived a bullet in the arm and five in the body. Cutting fell wounded with three bullets in his left arm. In seconds the machine guns killed six men and wounded three. That left eight, and the ranking soldier among them was Corporal Alvin C. York. York hurriedly assembled the remnants of his and Cutting's platoons. Savage's men were all dead.

Up the line, First Lieutenant Paul J. Vollmer was having problems of his own. Rumors that Americans had broken through sent troops into a panic. Some of them had been at the front since September 26 and were at the point of exhaustion. There was a sense that the end was near, and that a life sacrificed now was a life wasted. (p. 10)

Despite the wavering of some troops and reserves, the machine gunners continued pouring Spandau fire into the small circle where Corporal York was pinned down with seven privates and twenty or more prisoners. When the firefight started, Americans and Germans alike flattened themselves on the ground, behind stumps or trees. All except Corporal York. Alone in the muddy grass he assumed a prone position and kept firing. The gunners realized they would have to shoot over their own men to get at the Americans. To take aim that way, a gunner had to rise up from behind his weapon for a clear sight.

Seeing their heads pop up above the machine guns reminded York of the way turkeys popped up over those logs at the shooting matches back home. A turkey was tethered behind a log forty yards from the contestant, who got one shot with his muzzle loader when the big bird's head appeared. The difference to the corporal was that German heads were a lot bigger than turkeys'. "In order to sight me or swing their machine guns at me," he later explained, "the Germans had to show their heads above the guns, and every time I saw a head I just teched it off. 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."

One after another, York quickly dropped the machine gunners, "teching them off" with a single rifle shot each. Every few rounds, he would stop shooting and call for the Germans to surrender. "That's enough now! You boys quit and come on down!" Answered with bullets, he would reshoulder his Eddystone **[the M1917, .30-06 caliber rifle produced by Winchester Repeating Arms Co., at their plant in Eddystone, Pennsylvania.]** and pick off another several targets. (p. 11)

As the din began to subside, he rose to his feet. The protective brush around him was all shot up by now, and he figured he might as well stand up for a better view. When his three clips of rifle ammunition ran out, he drew his Colt .45 and continued firing. A German company commander, Lieutenant **[Fritz]** Endriss, mounted a charge of six men with fixed bayonets against York. As the attackers emerged from the brush at twenty-five yards in a ragged single file, York put another of his Tennessee marksmanship lessons into practice. He had learned with duck hunting that if he fired on the lead bird in the formation, the others would spook and scatter; but if he picked off targets from the rear forward, each one would be taken by surprise. So instead of firing at the first man in the oncoming line, York shot the last man first, dropping Endriss with a serious wound to the stomach. He then shot and killed the next-to-last attacker, the one in front of him, and so up the line. At that range, the first soldier in line had come dangerously close by the time the others were dispatched. York dropped him with only a couple of arms' length to spare. A single miss out of six would have meant certain death. (pp. 11-12)

The read-headed corporal had stilled enough machine guns to begin preparations for escorting his captives behind American lines. With his soldiers guarding the Germans, York began leading the group toward the front.

Occupied with incoming Allied rifle grenades and small arms fire, Lieutenant (Karl) Kubler nevertheless noticed the sound of his own machine guns growing fainter and less frequent. Taking two men with him to reconnoiter the position, he soon found himself facing a squad of Americans with fixed bayonets. Unable to see clearly in the underbrush, and assuming they were the advance guard of a larger flanking force, he surrendered and joined the group of his countrymen already marching by twos in front of them. (p. 12)

The yelling of both the Germans and their American captors attracted the attention of lieutenant Vollmer, who had walked back toward the ridge. Looking across the plain, he saw a line of American troops sneaking toward his flank. He sent orders to men in the immediate vicinity to open fire at once, then ordered a halt upon hearing the cry of, "Don't shoot! There are Germans in here!" Because of the undergrowth, Vollmer couldn't separate friendly targets from enemies. As he was considering what to do, York and those of his men not guarding prisoners rushed the lieutenant. He and his adjutant, Lieutenant (Karl) Glass, alone and thinking they had been surrounded by a large assault force, surrendered without resistance. (p. 12-13)

Gesturing to York, the commander asked, "English?"
"American," answered York.
"Good Lord!" said Vollmer. **"If you won't shoot any more I will make them give up."**

Vollmer had worked in Chicago before the war and spoke English. Corporal York ordered him to form the whole detail of prisoners into a column of twos. As he obeyed, Vollmer offered to try and get the other defenders to surrender if the sharpshooting American agreed not to fire on any more of them. York concurred, adding that if he *didn't* get them to stop, Vollmer himself would be the next one to be "teched off." The German officer produced a whistle and blew the signal for a cease-fire. With one exception, men came off the ridge and out of the brush with their hands in the air. As he approached York, one soldier tossed a grenade at the corporal, which exploded well in front of its intended target. York fired once at the man and "teched him off."

Vollmer was placed at the head of the column. York followed, flanked by two other German officers, holding his .45 in the small of the lieutenant's back. Behind him were two growing columns of prisoners, some carrying the wounded Americans, guarded at the flanks and rear by the seven remaining Company G privates **[Joseph Konotski, Percy Beardsley, Feodor Sok, Thomas C. Johnson, Michael A. Saccina, Patrick Donohue and George W. Willis].**

Approaching enemy defenses from behind, York realized for the first time that they had penetrated to the second German line. Now he had to pass through the real front. As they proceeded, more machine gunners turned their Spandaus around and began firing. York spoke to Vollmer. "Blow that whistle of yours or I'll take your head off, and theirs too." The German obeyed, and the men at that position put down their weapons and surrendered. Again there was a single exception, and again York felled him with a shot. (p. 13)

> **By this time there were so many Germans in the group that York was afraid they would be fired on by his own artillery. Overhearing snatches of the Americans' conversation as they discussed the situation, Vollmer began to wonder how many men there were in the command. "How many men have you got?" he asked.**
>
> **Without missing a beat, Corporal York answered, "I got a-plenty."**
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> **As he reached the American lines, York was relieved to encounter a support squad sent to help him.**
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> **York marched his prisoners to the battalion post of command, where the battalion adjutant, Lieutenant [Joseph A.] Woods, counted three officers and 129 enlisted men. Lieutenant Kuebler, to his chagrin, was not initially counted as an officer because he was wearing a trenchcoat with no insignia over his uniform.**
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> **It was 9:25 a.m., October 8, 1918, three hours and fifteen minutes after York and the rest of Company G began their charge over the crest of Hill 223.**
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> **Regimental didn't have room for so many men and sent York on to division headquarters to turn his prisoners over to the French military police at Varennes \va-ren'\.**
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> **News of the prisoners had preceded their arrival. When he reached Varennes, Corporal York was ordered to report to General Julian R. Lindsey. Escorted to headquarters, established in a shabby store near the center of town, the tall Tennessean saluted the brigadier.** (p. 14)
>
> **"Well, York, I hear you have captured the whole damn German army."**
> **"No, sir. I only got 132."**
>
> **The general sent York and his men to the artillery kitchen, where they enjoyed the luxury of a not meal at a table, without a drop of rain or an ounce of mud in sight.**
>
> **Returning to Company G late that night, York wrote briefly in his diary about the events of the day, ending with a thought of his deliverance:**
>
> > **So you can see here in this case of mine where God helped me out. I had bin living for God and working in the church some time before I come to the army. So I am a witness to the fact that God did help me out of that hard battle; for the bushes were shot up all around me and I never got a scratch.**[1] (p. 15)

IV The Reluctant Hero:

Alvin was a reluctant hero. When he returned to the United States he received a hero's welcome. He refused offers from Hollywood and vaudeville, turned his back on half a million dollars, and instead went home to the hills of Tennessee, saying, "Uncle Sam's uniform ain't for sale."

Perry describes York as "America's greatest twentieth-century Christian patriot." His final chapter, "A Hero's Legacy," sums up the legend of Sergeant Alvin C. York:

[1] Perry, ""Three Hours Fifteen Minutes," chap. 1 in *Sgt. York*, 6-15.

Modern culture is quick to label anyone a hero, to the point where the word has all but lost its meaning. Successful athletes are heroes. Honest politicians are heroes. People who return lost purses with the money still in them are heroes. As Florence King has observed, all anyone has to do to become a hero in America today is to fall in a hole and live to tell about it.

Today, such dilution of the title results from two forces opposing each other to an unprecedented extent. One is that the world is desperate for heroes. It always has been. We want someone we can hold up as an example to inspire us. We want to be part of a race that produces great people who accomplish great things; we want to be able to look at a hero and imagine that, with dedication and strength of character, we can be heroes too.

The opposing force, stronger than ever, is a culture that discourages heroism. While we crave it as always, heroism, so rare in the first place, has become increasingly difficult to find. A society that embraces relativism and multiculturalism is hard pressed to produce a hero. If every view of the world is equally acceptable, there can be no absolute standards of bravery, sacrifice, patriotism, faith, truth, fairness, fidelity, and honor. And without absolutes, there can be no heroes.

Real heroes are not now and were never defined by degrees of success; or by doing something they should do anyway even if most people don't; or, except in rare cases, by a single awe-inspiring moment of courage. Rather they are those people blessed and burdened with a God-given vision for improving their world that requires them to make a conscious, voluntary, life-changing sacrifice, which they make unhesitantly and without complaint.

Sergeant York is not a hero only because he killed about two dozen Germans, captured 132, and saved the lives of eleven American soldiers, including himself, one autumn morning in France. That proved his patriotism, bravery, and resourcefulness, not his heroism. (p. 331)

He is a hero because he felt a burden to use his fame for the benefit of the mountain children of Tennessee—rather than for his own comfort and security—and acted on that burden. He is a hero because, with a third grade education, he chose to take on the entrenched educational bureaucracies of Fentress County and Tennessee to get his school built.

He is a hero because he traveled throughout the country before and during World War II selling war bonds, raising money for the Red Cross, and lifting the spirits of American soldiers, all the while receiving—and asking—nothing but expense reimbursements. He is a hero because, sick and nearly destitute, he could endure the withering attacks of the IRS, avoiding financial ruin at the eleventh hour, and say only, "You know, this is a great country."

He is a hero because he had the moral foundation to be a hero. His life was guided by unshakable absolutes founded on the teachings of the Bible, which taught him what was right, and taught him his responsibility in seeing that right was done, regardless of the sacrifice.

> **Most important, Sergeant York is a hero because his inspiring example, transcend time and place. His story still moves us. One look at this backwoods Tennessee farmer with a third grade education, and we find ourselves persuaded that, if he can leave such a legacy, so might some of us who follow.**[2] (p. 332)

The best summary of the core principle that made Alvin York both a visible and an invisible hero is found in this exchange between Pastor Rosier Pile and Alvin in the motion picture *Sergeant York*:

> **ROSIER PILE (WALTER BRENNAN). You ain't registered yet, have you, Alvin?**
>
> **ALVIN YORK (GARY COOPER). Course I ain't.**
>
> **PILE. It's Tuesday, Alvin. You only got till six o'clock.**
>
> **YORK. I ain't a-gonna register.**
>
> **PILE. You gotta register, Alvin.**
>
> **YORK. I ain't a-gonna. I ain't a-goin' to war. War is killin' and The Book's agin killin', so war is agin The Book.**
>
> **PILE. You plumb right, Alvin. You got the usin' kind a religion, not the meetin'-house kind.**
>
> **YORK. The kind I got's the kind you teach me.**[3]

Alvin eventually came around to God's way of thinking rather than King James's, but the impact of this exchange is that this man was convinced whatever the Bible says is true and what it says is the way one has to run his life. Pile's phrase "the usin' kind a religion" classified Alvin as a believer who was interested in what the Word teaches and, once learned, it was to be applied without reservation.

York's last comment, "The kind I got's the kind you teach me" puts the onus on Pastor Pile. Rosier taught from the English of the King James Version and the Sixth Commandment's mandate, "Thou shalt not kill," had had serious impact on York's soul and in effect determined his entire attitude toward national service, warfare, and the legitimate exercise of killing those who threaten another country's people, their lives, and their property.

Had Pile known that the Hebrew word *rasah* does not mean "to kill" but rather "to commit premeditated murder," then York's dilemma would never have occurred.

Nevertheless, two magnificent points are made:

1. There are two kinds of "religion": the usin' kind and the meetin'-house kind.
2. Alvin subscribed to the former and thus applied the wisdom he thought the Bible intended for him to execute. It was Pastor Pile's responsibility to teach the Word accurately so that those who have the "usin' kind of religion" have it accurately stored in the wisdom compartment of their *kardia*'s stream of consciousness.

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[2] Perry, "A Hero's Legacy," chap. 28 in *Sgt. York*, 331-332.
[3] 16. "Draft Board Appeal," *Sergeant York*, DVD, directed by Howard Hawks (1941; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2006).

Wednesday night we will resume to our ongoing study, *The Church of the Living God,* and specifically the oration given by Wisdom in Proverbs 8. The objective of both is to motivate those who gather at Grace Doctrine Church to have the "usin' kind a religion," not the "meetin'-house kind."

Addendum: Medal of Honor Citation:

York, Alvin C.

Rank and organization: **Corporal, U.S. Army, Company G, 328th Infantry, 82ed Division.** ***Place and date:*** **Near Chatel-Chehery, France, 8 October 1918.** ***Entered service at:*** **Pall Mall, Tenn.** ***Born:*** **13 December 1887, Fentress County, Tenn.** ***Citation*****: After his platoon had suffered heavy casualties and 3 other noncommissioned officers had become casualties, Cpl. York assumed command. Fearlessly leading 7 men, he charged with great daring a machinegun nest which was pouring deadly and incessant fire upon his platoon. In this heroic feat the machinegun nest was taken, together with 4 officers and 128 men and several guns.**[4]

[4] "Citations of Awards of the Medal of Honor: World War I," in *The Congressional Medal of Honor: The Names, the Deeds* (Forest Ranch, CA: Sharp & Dunnigan Publications, 1984), 542.