

Alvin C. York
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Alvin C. York

This essay was adapted from an essay prepared by Lauren Grisham for a project created in association with the Fentress County Chamber of Commerce by the Center for Historic Preservation at Middle Tennessee State University in Murfreesboro, Tennessee.

Alvin C. York was born in Pall Mall, Tennessee on December 13, 1887. He spent all of his life in this area, except for the eighteen months he served with the United States Army during World War I. The third son of William and Mary Brooks York, Alvin had seven brothers and three sisters. He received the equivalent of a third-grade education within the community, went to work at his father's blacksmith shop, and later worked as a farm hand. When York was a young man his father died, and he assumed the role of sole provider for his mother and younger siblings.

During his early years, it was reported that York was considered a bit on the wild side. When the United States entered World War I in April 1917, he was working on a highway construction project for \$1.65 a day. It was around this time that a close friend of York's died. During a revival conducted by H.H. Russell of the Church of Christ in Christian Union, York had a life-changing religious experience. Following biblical teachings, York became opposed to violence and war. He initially considered becoming a conscientious objector when he was drafted. Later he reflected in a speech:

"I loved and trusted old Uncle Sam and I have always believed he did the right thing. But I was worried clean through. I didn't want to go and kill. I believed in my bible. And it distinctly said "THOU SHALL NOT KILL." And yet old Uncle Sam wanted me. And he said he wanted me most awfull bad. And I jest didn't know what to do. I was worried and worried. I couldn't think of anything else. My thoughts just wouldn't stay hitched" (Lee, 17).

While at Camp Gordon, Georgia, York received permission to go home for a couple of days to consider whether or not he wanted to apply for conscientious objector status. Upon his return, he determined that he was, in fact, going to be a soldier.

York traveled to France with the American Expeditionary Force in 1918. On October 8, 1918 during the Battle of the Argonne Forest, York's life took another extraordinary turn. York was part of a seventeen-man detail whose mission was to conquer German machine guns. Nearly single-handedly, he knocked out the German machine gun nests, killed 25 men, captured 132 prisoners, and gathered 35 machine guns. Nine of Alvin's comrades were injured or killed during this battle, including the sergeant in charge. It is reported that eight Germans were shot with exactly eight rifle shots and a seven-man patrol was killed with his automatic pistol.

On November 10, 1918, only ten days before the war ended, Alvin was promoted to sergeant. Then on April 11, 1919, he received the Congressional Medal of Honor for his actions

on October 8. York also received the Croix de Guerre from France. He received numerous other awards throughout his life.

On May 10, 1919, Alvin began his journey back home to Pall Mall, Tennessee. When he arrived in New York, he was met by representatives of the Tennessee Society. York was given a hero's welcome and a ticker-tape parade. Although York was very grateful, he wrote, "I wanted to get back to my people where I belonged and the little old mother and the little mountain girl who were waiting" (qtd. in Alvin C. York Biography).

One week and one day after his return, Alvin and his "little mountain girl," Gracie Williams, were married in a ceremony performed by the Governor of Tennessee, A.H. Roberts. After a two day honeymoon in Nashville, they moved onto a 385-acre farm which grateful Tennesseans had helped purchase.

However, the peaceful valley Alvin called home was not the same upon his return. People came from all over the country in order to meet him and to offer him business propositions, ranging from Broadway and Hollywood producers to advertisers wanting to commercialize and profit from his war efforts. He wrote at this time:

"I knew if I hadn't been to war and hadn't been a doughboy they never would have offered me anything. I also knew I didn't go to war to make a heap or to go on the stage or in the movies. I went over there to help make peace. And there was peace now, so I didn't take their thirty pieces of silver and betray that there old uniform of mine. I just wanted to be left alone to go back to my beginnings. The war was over. I had done my job and I had done it the best I could. So I figured I ought to be left alone and allowed to go back to the mountains where I belonged." (qtd. in Alvin C. York Biography).

A changed person, he realized the need for improved education in his secluded hometown community and decided to dedicate himself to improving educational opportunities. During the 1920s, York went on speaking tours in order to call attention to his mission for educational improvements for children in rural Fentress County, and to raise money for a school, the York Institute. York also showed an interest in politics in order to obtain funding for better roads, local employment opportunities, and for education. During the presidential election of 1932, he changed his political party in order to support Herbert Hoover and to protest Franklin D. Roosevelt's promise to repeal prohibition. However, once York saw the positive effects of the New Deal, he decided to support the president's relief efforts. In 1939, he was elected superintendent of the Cumberland Homesteads near Crossville.

In 1925, the Tennessee General Assembly set aside \$50,000 for the construction of the York Agricultural and Industrial Institute. Its mission was to train the students of Fentress County for a technological future. York, a Democrat, was at odds with the local Republican county executives over where the school should be located. When the local officials threatened eviction from the site in 1927, he went directly to the state legislature and turned to the media for

support. As a result, the Tennessee Department of Education was given control over the York Institute.

The school officially opened in 1929, but even with the state's backing, it lacked funding. Fentress County refused to give the school any money. York mortgaged his house twice to pay teachers' salaries, paying them out of his own pocket. He even purchased school buses. Although the investigation ultimately uncovered no wrong doings, Alvin faced charges by the Department of Education for incompetence; negligence, nepotism, and bringing in outsiders in 1933. Many felt that this was an accusation brought on by York's antagonists. Regardless, York was unable to continue funding the school the way he had been. York was appointed President Emeritus and led the school's ceremonial activities. With this change of administration, the Department of Education required that all teachers have a bachelor's degree, along with other mandatory criteria.

Throughout the 1930's York refused offers to make a film based on his service in World War I. York did not want his life to be used to glorify war. York was ultimately swayed by Hollywood filmmaker Jesse L Lasky's promise that the film would not glorify war and his need for funding for an interdenominational Bible school. After much negotiation, York settled on a contract that gave him fifty thousand dollars plus two percent of the gross sales. The film, "Sergeant York," was the highest grossing film of 1941. Following Pearl Harbor, it also served as an unofficial recruitment film. Gary Cooper won the Academy Award for Best Actor for his portrayal of York.

In 1951, the IRS accused York of not paying taxes on the movie profits that had been given to the school. York spent ten years resolving the issue with the help of Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives Sam Rayburn and Congressman Joe L. Evins. Additionally, citizens nationwide came to his aide with a York relief fund.

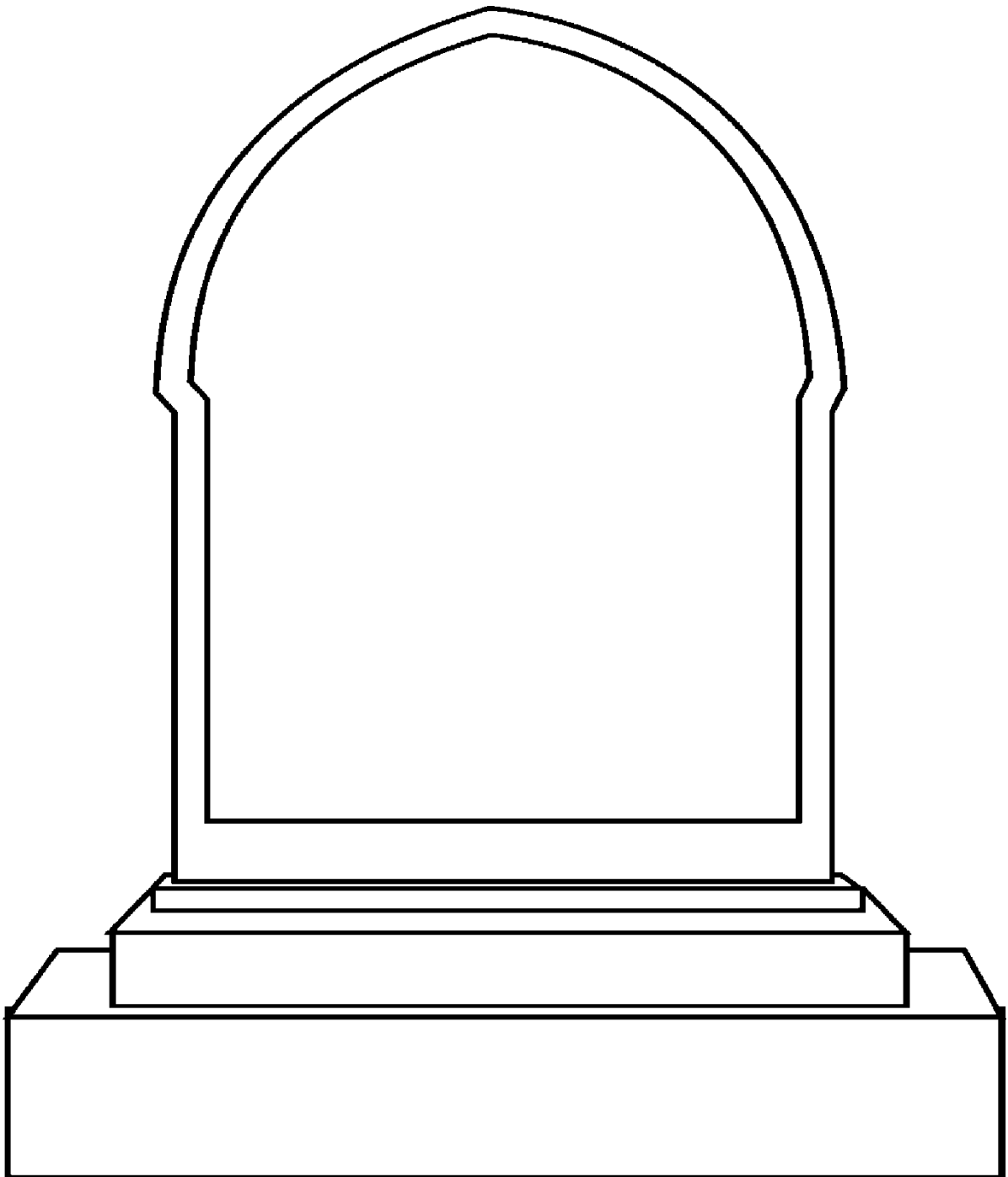
In the midst of this controversy, York suffered a stroke in 1954 that left him bedridden until his death on September 2, 1964. Alvin C. York was buried with full military honors in Wolf River Methodist Church Cemetery. An estimated 7,000 people attended his funeral.

Source: Grisham, Lauren. "Biography of Alvin C. York." *Alvin C. York and World War I Teacher's Guide*. Sergeant York Patriotic Foundation, n.d. 21 July 2014, <<http://www.sgtyork.org/images/Teacher-Guide-AlvinCYork-WWI.pdf>>

Alvin C. York

Summarize the text to write an epitaph for Alvin C. York.

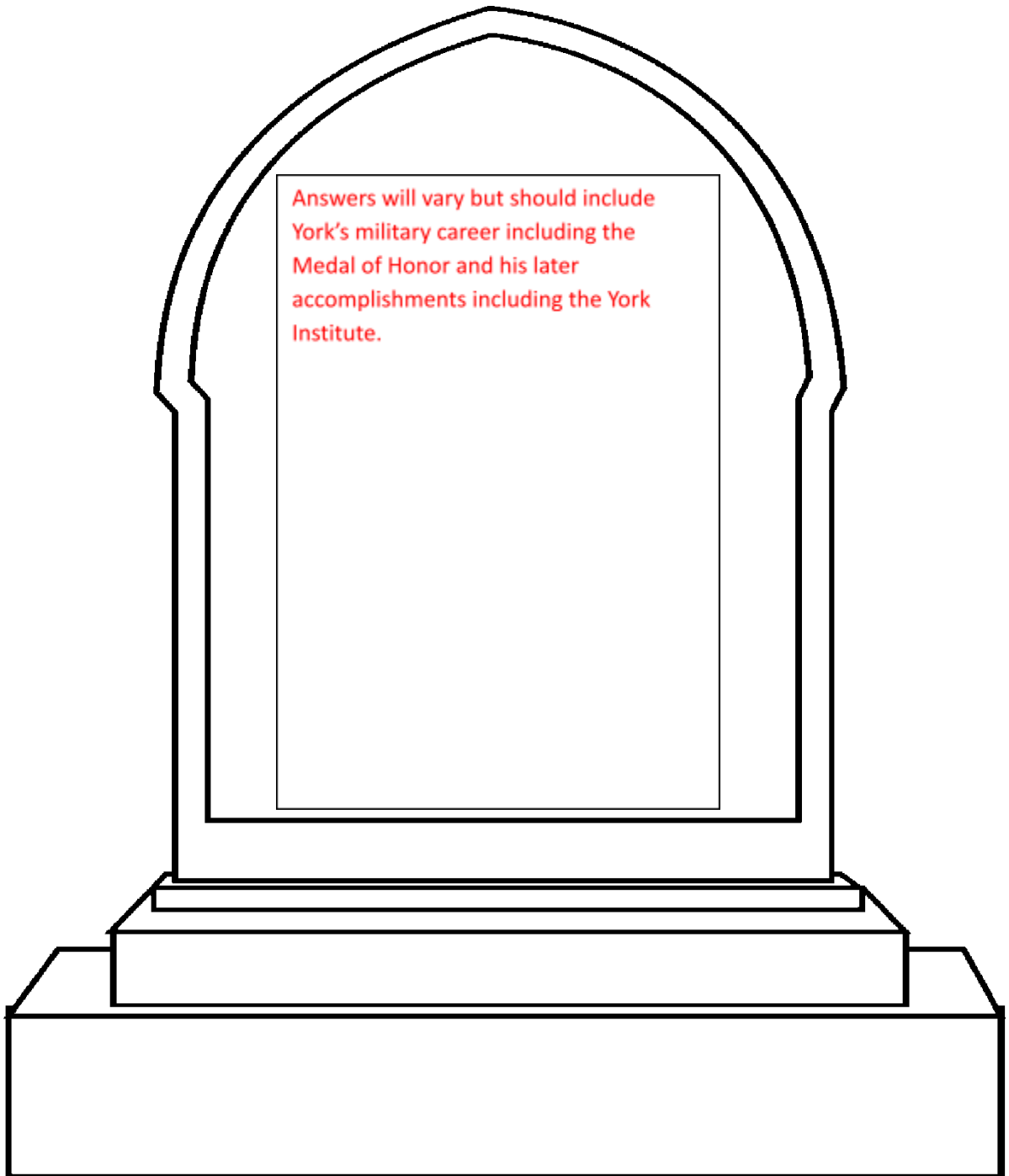
An epitaph is a brief statement about the deceased person, sometimes in the form of a poem.



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Summarize the text to write an epitaph for Alvin C. York.

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Alvin C. York Diary

On October 8, 1918, Sergeant Alvin C. York captured 132 Germans during the Meuse-Argonne offensive. He was later awarded the Medal of Honor for his valor. His diary entry describing October 8 is below.

OCTOBER 8th 1918

Argonne Forest, France-- So on the morning of the 8th, just before daylight, we started for the hill of Chattel Chehery. So before we got there it got light, and the Germans sent over a heavy barrage and also gas, and we put on our gas masks and just pressed right on through those shells and got to the top of Hill 223 to where we was to start over the top at 6:10 A. M.

And they was to give us a barrage. So the time came, and no barrage, and we had to start without one. So as we started over the top at 6:10 A.M., and the Germans was putting their machine guns to work all over the hill in front of us and on our left and right. So I was in support and I could see my pals getting picked off until it almost looked like there was none left.

This was our first offensive battle in the Argonne. My battalion was one of the attacking battalions. My platoon was the second. We were in support of the first. We advanced just a few yards behind them. We got through the shells and the gas all right, and occupied Hill 223, which was to be our jumping off place for the advance on the railroad. When the zero hour came, we went over the top and started our advance.

We had to charge across a valley several hundred yards wide and rush the machine gun emplacements on the ridge on the far side. And there were machine guns on the ridges on our flanks too.

It was kind of triangular shaped valley. So you see we were getting it from the front and both flanks. Well, the first and second waves got about halfway across the valley and then were held up by machine gun fire from the three sides. It was awful. Our losses were very heavy.

The advancement was stopped and we were ordered to dig in. I don't believe our whole battalion or even our whole division, could have taken those machine guns by a straightforward attack.

The Germans got us, and they got us right smart. They just stopped us dead in our tracks. It was hilly country with plenty of brush, and they had plenty of machine guns entrenched along those commanding ridges. And I'm telling you they were shooting straight. Our boys just went down like the long grass before the mowing machine at home. And, to make matters worse, something had happened to our artillery and we had no barrage.

So our attack just faded out. And there we were, lying down, about halfway across, and no barrage, and those German machine guns and big shells getting us hard.

I just knew that we couldn't go on again until those machine guns were mopped up. So we decided to try and get them by a surprise attack in the rear.

We figured there must have been over thirty of them, and they were hidden on the ridges about 300 yards in front and on the left of us.

So there was 17 of us boys went around on the left flank to see if we couldn't put those guns out of action. So when we went around and fell in behind those guns, we first saw two Germans with Red Cross bands on their arms. So we asked them to stop, and they did not. So one of the boys shot at them and they run back to our right. So we all run after them--

Sergeant Harry Parsons gave the command to what was left of our squads-- my squad, Corporal Savage's squad, Corporal Early's, and Corporal Cutting's-- to go around through the brush and try and make the surprise attack.

According to orders, we advanced through our front line and on through the brush and up the hill on the left. We went very quietly and quickly. We had to. And we took care to keep well to our left.

Without any loss and in right smart time, we were across the valley and on the hill where the machine guns were emplaced. The brush and the hilly nature of the country hid us from the Germans.

We were nearly 300 yards in front of our own front line. When we figured we were on top of the hill and on their left flank, we had a little conference.

Some of the boys wanted to attack from the flank. But Early and I and some of the others thought it would be best to go right on over the hill and jump them from the rear. We decided on this rear attack.

We opened up in skirmishing order and flitting from brush to brush, quickly crossed over the hill and down into the gully behind. Then we suddenly swung around behind them. The first Germans we saw were two men with Red Cross bands on their arms. They jumped out of the brush in front of us and bolted like two scared rabbits.

We called to them to surrender, and one of our boys fired and missed. And they kept on going. We wanted to capture them before they gave the alarm. We were now well behind the German trench and in the rear of the machine guns that were holding up our big advance.

We were deep in the brush and we couldn't see the Germans and they couldn't see us. But we could hear their machine guns shooting something awful. Savage's squad was leading, and mine, Early's and Cutting's followed.

--And when we jumped across a little stream of water that was there, they was about 15 or 20 Germans jumped up and threw up their hands and said, "Kamerad!" So the one in charge of us boys told us not to shoot: they was going to give up anyway.

It was headquarters. There were orderlies, stretcher bearers and runners, and a major and two other officers, They were just having breakfast and there was a mess of beef-steaks, jellies, jams, and loaf bread around. They were unarmed, all except the major.

We jumped them right smart and covered them, and told them to throw up their hands and to keep them up. And they did. I guess they thought the whole American army was in their rear. And we didn't stop to tell them anything different. No shots were fired, and there was no talking between us except when we told them to "put them up."

So by this time some of the Germans from on the hill was shooting at us. Well I was giving them the best I had, and by this time the Germans had got their machine guns turned around and fired on us. So they killed 6 and wounded 3 of us. So that just left 8, and then we got into it right by this time. So we had a hard battle for a little while--

I don't know whether it was the German major, but one yelled something out in German that we couldn't understand. And then the machine guns on top swung around and opened fire on us. There were about thirty of them. They were commanding us from a hillside less than thirty yards away. They couldn't miss. And they didn't!

They killed all of Savage's squad; they got all of mine but two; they wounded Cutting and killed two of his squad; and Early's squad was well back in the brush on the extreme right and not yet under the direct fire of the machine guns, and so they escaped. All except Early. He went down with three bullets in his body. That left me in command. I was right out there in the open.

And those machine guns were spitting fire and cutting down the undergrowth all around me something awful. And the Germans were yelling orders. You never heard such a 'racket in all of your life. 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.

I don't know what the other boys were doing. They claim they didn't fire a shot. They said afterwards they were on the right, guarding the prisoners. And the prisoners were lying down and the machine guns had to shoot over them to get me. As soon as the machine guns opened fire on me, I began to exchange shots with them.

I had no time nohow to do nothing but watch them-there German machine gunners and give them the best I had. Every time I seed a German I jes teched him off. At first I was shooting from a prone position; that is lying down; jes like we often shoot at the targets in the shooting matches in the mountains of Tennessee; and it was jes about the same distance. But the targets here were bigger. I jes couldn't miss a German's head or body at that distance. And I didn't. Besides, it weren't no time to miss nohow.

I knowed that in order to shoot me the Germans would have to get their heads up to see where I was lying. And I knowed that my only chance was to keep their heads down. And I done done it. I covered their positions and let fly every time I seed anything to shoot at. Every time a head come up I done knocked it down. Then they would sorter stop for a moment and then another head would come up and I would knock it down, too. I was giving them the best I had.

I was right out in the open and the machine guns [there were over thirty of them in continuous action] were spitting fire and cutting up all around me something awful. But they didn't seem to be able to hit me. All the time the Germans were shouting orders. You never heard such a racket in all of your life. Of course, all of this only took a few minutes. As soon as I was able I stood up and begun to shoot off-hand, which is my favorite position. I was still sharpshooting with that-there old army rifle. I used up several clips. The barrel was getting hot and my rifle ammunition was running low, or was where it was hard for me to get at it quickly. But I had to keep on shooting jes the same.

In the middle of the fight a German officer and five men done jumped out of a trench and charged me with fixed bayonets. They had about twenty-five yards to come and they were coming right smart. I only had about half a clip left in my rifle; but I had my pistol ready. I done flipped it out fast and teched them off, too.

I teched off the sixth man first; then the fifth; then the fourth; then the third; and so on. That's the way we shoot wild turkeys at home. You see we don't want the front ones to know that we're getting the back ones, and then they keep on coming until we get them all. Of course, I hadn't time to think of that. I guess I jes naturally did it. I knowed, too, that if the front ones wavered, or if I stopped them the rear ones would drop down and pump a volley into me and get me.

Then I returned to the rifle, and kept right on after those machine guns. I knowed now that if I done kept my head and didn't run out of ammunition I had them. So I done hollered to them to come down and give up. I didn't want to kill any more'n I had to. I would tech a couple of them off and holler again. But I guess they couldn't understand my language, or else they couldn't hear me in the awful racket that was going on all around. Over twenty Germans were killed by this time.

--and I got hold of the German major. After he seed me stop the six Germans who charged with fixed bayonets he got up off the ground and walked over to me and yelled "English?"

I said, "No, not English."

He said, "What?"

I said, "American."

He said, "Good ----!" Then he said, "If you won't shoot any more I will make them give up." I had killed over twenty before the German major said he would make them give up. I covered him with my automatic and told him if he didn't make them stop firing I would take off his head next. And he knew I meant it. He told me if I didn't kill him, and if I stopped shooting the others in the trench, he would make them surrender.

So he blew a little whistle and they came down and began to gather around and throw down their guns and belts. All but one of them came off the hill with their hands up, and just before that one got to me he threw a little hand grenade which burst in the air in front of me.

I had to tech him off. The rest surrendered without any more trouble. There were nearly 100 of them.

So we had about 80 or 90 Germans there disarmed, and had another line of Germans to go through to get out. So I called for my men, and one of them answered from behind a big oak tree, and the others were on my right in the brush.

So I said, "Let's get these Germans out of here."

One of my men said, "it is impossible."

So I said, "No; let's get them out."

So when my man said that, this German major said, "How many have you got?" and I said, "I have got a-plenty," and pointed my pistol at him all the time.

In this battle I was using a rifle and a .45 Colt automatic pistol.

So I lined the Germans up in a line of twos, and I got between the ones in front, and I had the German major before me. So I marched them straight into those other machine guns and I got them.

The German major could speak English as well as I could. Before the war he used to work in Chicago. And I told him to keep his hands up and to line up his men in column of twos, and to do it in double time. And he did it. And I lined up my men that were left on either side of the column, and I told one to guard the rear. I ordered the prisoners to pick up and carry our wounded. I wasn't a-goin' to leave any good American boys lying out there to die. So I made the Germans carry them. And they did.

And I takened the major and placed him at the head of the column and I got behind him and used him as a screen. I poked the automatic in his back and told him to hike. And he hiked.

The major suggested we go down a gully, but I knew that was the wrong way. And I told him we were not going down any gully. We were going straight through the German front line trenches back to the American lines.

It was their second line that I had captured. We sure did get a long way behind the German trenches! And so I marched them straight at that old German front line trench. And some more machine guns swung around and began to spit at us. I told the major to blow his whistle or I would take off his head and theirs too. So he blew his whistle and they all surrendered-- all except one. I made the major order him to surrender twice. But he wouldn't. And I had to tech him off. I hated to do it. I've been doing a tolerable lot of thinking about it since. He was probably a brave soldier boy. But I couldn't afford to take any chances and so I had to let him have it.

There was considerably over a hundred prisoners now. It was a problem to get them back safely to our own lines. There was so many of them there was danger of our own artillery mistaking us for a German counter-attack and opening up on us. I sure was relieved when we run into the relief squads that had been sent forward through the brush to help us.

On the way back we were constantly under heavy shell fire and I had to double-time them to get them through safely. There was nothing to be gained by having any more of them wounded or killed. They done surrendered to me and it was up to me to look after them. And so I done done it.

So when I got back to my major's p.c. I had 132 prisoners. We marched those German prisoners on back into the American lines to the battalion p.c. (post of command), and there we came to the Intelligence Department. Lieutenant Woods came out and counted 132 prisoners. And when he counted them he said, "York, have you captured the whole German army?" And I told him I had a tolerable few.

We were ordered to take them out to regimental headquarters at Chattel Chehery, and from there all the way back to division headquarters, and turn them over to the military police. On the way back we were constantly under heavy shell fire and I had to double time them to get them through safely.

There was nothing to be gained by having any more of them wounded or killed. They had surrendered to me, and it was up to me to look after them. And so I done done it.

I had orders to report to Brigadier General Lindsey, and he said to me, "Well, York, I hear you have captured the whole ----- German army." And I told him I only had 132.

After a short talk he sent us to some artillery kitchens, where we had a good warm meal. And it sure felt good. Then we rejoined our outfits and with them fought through to our objective, the Decauville Railroad.

And the Lost Battalion was able to come out that night. We cut the Germans off from their supplies when we cut that old railroad, and they withdrew and backed up.

So you can see here in this case of mine where God helped me out. I had been 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.

So you can see that God will be with you if you will only trust Him; and I say that He did save me. Now, He will save you if you will only trust Him.

The next morning Captain Danforth sent me back with some stretcher bearers to see if there were any of our American boys that we had missed. But they were all dead. And there were a lot of German dead. We counted twenty-eight, which is just the number of shots I fired. And there were thirty-five machine guns and a whole mess of equipment and small arms.

The salvage corps was busy packing it up. And I noticed the bushes all around where I stood in my fight with the machine guns were all cut down. The bullets went over my head and on either side. But they never touched me.

Source: York, Alvin C. *The Diary of Alvin C. York*. York Institute, n.d. Web 21 July 2014. <[http://acacia.pair.com/Acacia.Vignettes/The.Diary.of.Alvin.York.html#October 8th 1918](http://acacia.pair.com/Acacia.Vignettes/The.Diary.of.Alvin.York.html#October%208th%201918)>