

The German Turkey Shoot: the Heroics of Alvin C. York

by Michelle Hardman
Wittenberg Class of 1999
Hartje Award

Pressing himself chest first into the mud, Corporal Alvin York stared uphill at the nests of German machine guns which had just cut down six of his fellow soldiers. Three others had been wounded, including the officer in charge, Sergeant Bernard Early. Only eight doughboys remained from the suicide mission that had begun earlier that morning, October 8, 1918.¹ Sergeant Early and three squads already depleted due to earlier casualties had been sent to outflank the German machine guns that were raining leaden fire down upon the "All American" 82d Division.² They had managed to advance one and a half miles under the protection of the dense Argonne Forest in western France before happening upon two German medics, who fled to sound the alarm at the sight of the Americans.³ Early and his men followed in hasty pursuit, dodging trees and branches and leaping the banks of a small stream before breaking through the underbrush into a clearing. There, lounging about in their shirtsleeves, eating breakfast, and generally unprepared for an attack, were twenty members of the German 210th Reserve Infantry.⁴ The Germans, being surrounded by the armed Americans, quickly surrendered, but dropped to the ground in unison an instant before machine gun fire tore through the clearing and the still upright Americans. One American soldier, who had been to the left of the rest, dove between two bushes and edged his way to a clear view of the machine guns just forty yards uphill.⁵

This soldier was none other than Tennessee born Alvin York, a sharpshooter who had learned his skill "teching off" turkey and squirrel in the backwoods of the Cumberland Mountains. At a range of forty yards, the same distance between him and the firing Germans,

he could plug ten rifle bullets into a space no larger than that of a man's thumbnail.⁶ As a lull came in the fire, York went on the offensive.

When the Germans raised their heads from the pits to access the situation, York rolled into a sitting position and "... 'teched off' Germans with his Enfield rifle the way he had so often killed turkeys back home; only now the stakes were bigger and, to York's delight, so were the targets."⁷ The soldiers who escaped York's first round of shots, dove back into their nests and released a burst of waist-level machine gunfire. Fear of hitting the German prisoners still prone on the ground forced them to raise their heads out of the pits in order to sight York. Every time one attempted to take aim, he got an American bullet in his head, courtesy of the Tennessee corporal.

By this time the Germans had realized two things. One, they were dealing with a lone man and two, bullets were not working. In a desperate effort, six of their men crept through the bushes on the left of York, fixed bayonets to their rifles and charged.⁸ They knew his cartridge contained only five rounds and reasoned that at least one of them should be able to reach him. Unfortunately, while shooting his rifle, York had kept his .45 Colt automatic dangling from a finger of his right hand.⁹ He raised his pistol as the Germans charged and, using his off-hand, once more drew upon his hunting background. When shooting a group of turkeys, he always shot in the order of last to first, thus keeping the turkeys unaware of what was happening behind them. He reasoned his only threat was if the Germans stopped charging and fired a volley, so he shot them, last to first, killing them all before they had advanced more than ten yards. They "...

squealed just like stuck pigs."¹⁰

At this point, with his gun hot in his hands and his ammo running low, York shouted for the Germans to surrender just as a bullet flew past his ear. Lieutenant Vollmer, one of the prisoners still pressed to the ground, had pulled his pistol and fired it empty. Every shot missed York.¹¹ Realizing that they were beaten, Vollmer shouted to York that he would surrender his men, and, with York's automatic leveled at his head, he did so. One man ignored Vollmer and threw a grenade, which missed York and injured instead one of the German prisoners York shot and killed the offending soldier.¹² The other Germans, witnessing this and all of the previous events, stood up and

surrendered. As York lined the prisoners up by twos, Vollmer asked just how many Americans were with him. He replied "a-plenty;" actually only seven remained alive.¹³

Using the Germans as human shields, York and the other seven proceeded to march down the hill, back toward the American line. On their way they encountered several more German machine gun nests, all of whom surrendered and joined the ranks of the prisoners. Near the foot of the hill, they met up with an American patrol, who escorted them back to safety, where Brigadier General Lindsay would later say, "Well, York, I hear you have captured the whole damned German army," to which York would reply, "I only had 132."¹⁴

End Notes

¹ Sam K. Cowan, *Sergeant York and His People* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1922), 25.

² David D. Lee, *Sergeant York: An American Hero* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1985), 28, 33.

³ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁵ Cowan, *York and His People*, 24-5.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁷ Lee, *An American Hero*, 35.

⁸ Alvin C. York, *Sergeant York: His Own Life Story and War Diary*, ed. Tom Skeyhill (New York: Doubleday, Doran, and Company, Inc., 1928), 228.

⁹ Lee, *An American Hero*, 35.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹² Tom Skeyhill, *Sergeant York: Last of the Long Hunters* (Philadelphia: The John C. Winston Company, 1930), 213.

¹³ York, *The Story of His Life*, 231.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 235.

Bibliography

Cowan, Sam K. *Sergeant York and his People*. New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1922.

Lee, David D. *Sergeant York: An American Hero*. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1985.

Skeyhill, Tom. *Sergeant York: Last of the Long Hunters*. Philadelphia: The John C. Winston Company, 1930.

York, Alvin C. *Sergeant York: His Own Life Story and War Diary*. Edited by Tom Skeyhill. New York: Doubleday, Doran and Company, Inc., 1928.