

**World War I****BIOGRAPHY READING****Alvin C. “Sergeant” York****WHY AM I IMPORTANT?**

*Alvin C. York, or “Sergeant York,” was America’s best-known World War I hero. He used his exceptional skill as a marksman to force the surrender of a German machine-gun outpost. York took wartime violence very seriously, however, and did not want to become a celebrity because of his actions. As a result, he spent his postwar years operating a farm and raising money for education. How did York’s later years demonstrate his integrity?*

Alvin Cullum York was born in Pall Mall, Tennessee, in 1887. He came from a family of poor farmers and was the third of 11 children. York stopped attending school after the third grade to work on the family farm and in his father’s small blacksmith shop. After his father died in 1911, York became a day laborer on local railroad crews.

York gained a reputation as a wild young man. He drank homemade whiskey, enjoyed gambling, got into fights, and was an expert sharpshooter. In early 1915, however, York experienced a religious conversion and decided to change his lifestyle. The church he joined, the Church of Christ in Christian Union, did not allow its members to drink alcohol or gamble. It also condemned violence and opposed warfare. York vowed to live according to the church’s teaching.

York faced a dilemma when he received a draft notice in the summer of 1917. Because he believed that participating in the violence of the Great War would violate his religious faith, York applied to be free from the draft as a conscientious objector (a person who, for moral or religious reasons, refuses to fight). After his request was denied by the local and state draft boards, York joined the U.S. Army in November. After months of training and a long debate with his company commander about biblical references to warfare, York decided that it was morally acceptable to join the fight against Germany.

York’s unit was sent to the western front in June 1918, and in early October became involved in heavy fighting in France’s Argonne Forest. On the morning of October 8, York’s commanding officer ordered him and 16 other soldiers to take out a German machine-gun outpost that was firing at their battalion. The men slipped behind enemy lines, and while moving through the forest, they came upon a group of about 20 Germans who were having breakfast. The surprised Germans surrendered. Noise from this encounter, however, alerted the nearby machinegunners. They turned their fire on York and his comrades, and in a few moments 9 of the 17 Americans had been killed or wounded.

York decided to go on the offensive. While his unharmed companions guarded the prisoners, he occupied a spot downhill from the machine guns. From this position, he shot at least a dozen machinegunners who had stood up in their bunkers to look for him. York then gunned down a group of six German soldiers who charged him with bayonets. This incredible display of deadly skill compelled the German commander of the machine guns to surrender the rest of his men. York and the other surviving Americans arranged the captives into a column and marched them toward Allied territory. They apprehended several more German soldiers along the way, and by the time they reached battalion headquarters they had 132 prisoners.

York's actions in the Argonne Forest made him famous. The army promoted him to sergeant on November 1, and he received the Congressional Medal of Honor several months later. When he returned to the United States in May 1919, "Sergeant York" was greeted with a ticker-tape parade in New York City and a standing ovation from the House of Representatives. Magazine articles hailed his bravery, and advertisers asked him to endorse their products. York, however, was not interested in promoting himself. Troubled by the fact that he had killed people, York did not want to use his fame to become rich. He quickly returned to Tennessee and married his hometown sweetheart, Gracie Williams.

Over the next decade, York ran a small farm and started a large family. He also raised money to build a vocational and agricultural school for rural youth in Tennessee. This school, the Alvin C. York Institute, opened in 1929 and is still in operation today. York often referred to this school as his proudest achievement.

In 1941 Warner Brothers studio released *Sergeant York*, a movie that dramatized York's life and heroism during World War I. York hoped that the film would help increase public support for the United States to oppose Germany in World War II. He used his share of the profits from the movie to help open a small Bible school. In 1954 York suffered a stroke that left him bedridden for the rest of his life. He died 10 years later and was buried in Pall Mall with full military honors.

**UNDERSTANDING WHAT YOU READ** After you have finished reading the selection, answer the following questions in the space provided.

1. What dilemma did Alvin C. York face when he received a draft notice in 1917?

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2. Where did York's army unit serve in 1918?

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## Chapter 22: Biography Reading continued

3. How did York force the German commander of a machine-gun outpost to surrender his men?

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4. How did York spend his time during the 1920s?

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### ACTIVITY

Imagine that you are Alvin York on the evening of October 8, 1918. On a separate sheet of paper, write a diary entry describing the morning's events and your thoughts about them.