Originally a [conscientious objector](http://americanhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/252628?terms=Alvin+York), the humble and pious Alvin Cullum York was the most famous American doughboy (soldier) of [World War I](http://americanhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/252628?terms=Alvin+York). His exploits as a marksman were legendary and were further popularized by a noted 1940 movie. But true to his religious leanings, York shunned wealth and fame, led a life of modesty, and died in obscurity.

York was born in Pall Mall, [Tennessee](http://americanhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/252628?terms=Alvin+York) on December 13, 1887, one of 11 children. He grew up in poverty and acquired little formal [education](http://americanhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/252628?terms=Alvin+York). Forced to hunt for food at an early age, York became a superb marksman. He matured into a large, stout individual, much given to drinking, [gambling](http://americanhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/252628?terms=Alvin+York), and fighting until 1911, when he experienced a religious conversion. As a member of the Church of Christ and Christian Union, a tightly controlled fundamentalist sect, York completely changed his outlook on life. Consistent with the teachings of his creed, he also became a church elder and a committed pacifist.

When the United States entered World War I in 1917, York applied for conscientious objector status twice but was denied. He was then inducted into the [U.S. Army](http://americanhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/252628?terms=Alvin+York), astounded his drill instructors with his shooting skill, and prepared for shipment to Europe. When York made clear to superiors his uneasiness at the prospect of fighting, they referred him to the battalion commander, Maj. George E. Buxton, who was a Bible scholar. For three days, the two men debated chapter and verse relating to war and the moral obligations it posed to men of good conscience. The major then granted York a two-day leave to think it over, and York agonized but returned ready to fight. For him, the war had become a moral crusade.

That summer, York arrived in France as a corporal and part of G Company, 328th U.S. Infantry, 82nd Infantry Division. On October 8, 1918, he was involved with fighting in the Argonne Forest sector and led 17 men against a German strong point. His patrol stealthily surprised and captured a small German detachment, which included the major of a machine-gun battalion. Suddenly, the men came under automatic fire from several emplacements. Six Americans died, and the rest were pinned guarding the German prisoners, so York crept forward to engage the enemy alone. In a one-sided exchange, he quickly shot down 17 enemy gunners. When the Germans realized they were opposing one man, a party of seven men rushed his position in a column. York's rifle was out of ammunition, so he drew a pistol and knocked down his attackers one by one. At this point, the German major intervened and pleaded, "Don't shoot any more, and I'll make them surrender." York agreed, and the remaining Americans rounded up 132 prisoners and marched them back to an incredulous battalion headquarters. When informed of the deed, Gen. [John J. Pershing](http://americanhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/252628?terms=Alvin+York), renowned for sparse compliments, pronounced York "the greatest civilian soldier of the war." Supreme Allied Commander Ferdinand Foch also lauded his exploit as "the greatest accomplishment by any private soldier of all the armies of Europe." Consequently, York received a promotion to sergeant, the Congressional Medal of Honor, the French Croix de Guerre, and 50 other decorations. Along with Dan Daly of the Marine Corps, he was the most heavily decorated soldier of the war.

York's exploits made him the most famous and celebrated American of World War I. The modest mountain man returned home to receive a ticker-tape parade in New York City and a farm provided by his native state of Tennessee. However, York steadfastly turned down numerous and lucrative promotional offers, insisting, "Uncle Sam's uniform was not for sale." York published his autobiography in 1928, and in 1940, he agreed to allow a movie, *Sergeant York* with [Gary Cooper](http://americanhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/252628?terms=Alvin+York), to be made. This patriotic film was well received critically and won Cooper an [Academy Award](http://americanhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/252628?terms=Alvin+York) in 1941. York then took the $200,000 proceeds from the film and invested them in a vocational training center and a Bible college in the hills of Tennessee. His generosity nearly proved his undoing; when York did not keep enough of the money to pay income taxes, Congressman [Sam Rayburn](http://americanhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/252628?terms=Alvin+York) of [Texas](http://americanhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/252628?terms=Alvin+York) privately raised the money to settle the account. The old marksman continued living in obscurity until his death in Nashville on September 2, 1964. In the opinion of historians and military professionals, then and since, York represented the ideal "citizen-soldier."

**CITATION**: "Alvin York." *American History*. ABC-CLIO