

This Day in History... December 13, 1887

Happy Birthday Alvin York

World War I hero Alvin Cullum York was born on December 13, 1887, in Pall Mall, Tennessee.

The third of 11 children, York only attended school for nine months. His father withdrew the children from school so they could help work on the family farm and hunt and fish to provide food for everyone.

York's father died in 1911, leaving him to help raise his younger siblings. He soon found work in railroad construction and later logging to help provide for the family. A member of the Church of Christ in Christian Union, York had a religious experience in his 20s that reaffirmed his faith. In 1917, at the age of 29, he registered for the draft as required by law. He declared himself a pacifist and filed a claim for conscientious objector status, but was denied. York was then drafted into the Army that November.



This stamp was issued in 2018 for the 100th anniversary of WWI.

York was concerned that fighting in the war was in direct opposition to his beliefs. He then engaged in a lengthy conversation with his company commander, who convinced him that the Bible supported the service. York went on to gain fame for his actions in the Argonne Forest on October 8, 1918. After losing his superior officer and eight other men, York became the leader of the small squadron. Serving as an acting corporal, he led 17 men against a German stronghold, with the goal of taking the position and capturing prisoners. They fared well at the start – taking several captives and no enemy fire. The Germans then launched a counterattack, killing six of York's men.

York left his remaining 11 men behind to guard the prisoners while he set out to finish the mission. York took out 17 gunners with his sniper rifle before being charged by seven soldiers who realized he was the only one they were fighting. After killing them all with just his pistol, York completed his mission and brought back a total of 132 German prisoners. York was promoted to sergeant and earned the Medal of Honor for his actions.

York's heroism didn't immediately gain attention back home. It wasn't until an April 1919 article in the Saturday Evening Post recounted his actions that his story became well known. The Tennessee

Society arranged for him to visit New York City and Washington, DC, and hosted a formal banquet in his honor. After being discharged, he returned home where he was honored with several more celebrations and got married. In the weeks and months to come, York was offered thousands of dollars for appearances, product endorsements, and movie rights, but he refused those and instead promoted charitable and civic causes. He did accept a farm gifted to him by the state of Tennessee, but he ended up going into debt trying to run it.

York went on to found a school in Tennessee and in the 1930s worked as a project superintendent with the Civilian Conservation Corps. He oversaw the creation of Byrd Lake in Cumberland Mountain State Park and worked as the park's superintendent until 1940. Also that year, York finally agreed to allow a movie to be made about his life, so he could use the funds to finance a Bible college.



Cooper played York in the movie about his life.

As World War II spread in other parts of the globe, York was an outspoken advocate for US intervention. During a speech at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, he declared, "We must fight again! The time is not now ripe, nor will it ever be, to compromise with Hitler, or the things he stands for." President Roosevelt was moved by York's speeches and often quoted them. York attempted to re-enlist in the Army once the US joined the war, but he was in poor health. He was commissioned a major in the Signal Corps and toured training camps and led bond drives.

York's health continued to decline over the years and he died on September 2, 1964. After his death, President Johnson said York was an example of "the gallantry of American fighting men and their sacrifices on behalf of freedom."



Alvin York was one of America's most decorated soldiers of World War I, earning the Medal of Honor and Distinguished Service Cross, among others.



This stamp pictures the Army, Air Force, and Navy/Coast Guard/Marines Medals of Honor.

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