



## **The Legacy of Sgt. Alvin C. York – Service Beyond Heroism**

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World War I changed the world. And in many ways, it is the forgotten war that needs to be remembered once again in the 21st Century. One such remembrance is Sgt. Alvin C. York of the Upper Cumberland Valley of Tennessee. He did not want to fight in the war due to his faith, but was inspired to do so by his drill sergeant who gave him a Bible and an American history book.

On October 8, 1918, in less than fifteen minutes, his life would change forever. He single-handedly captured four German officers and one hundred twenty-eight German soldiers while leading his battered platoon behind enemy lines. For his uncanny heroism, he received the U.S. Medal of Honor and the French Croix de Guerre and became an instant nationwide hero. In 1941, the movie ‘Sergeant York’ starring actor Gary Cooper was released portraying his fifteen-minute heroic feat and the events that led up to it.

York’s inspirational heroism may have brought World War I to an early conclusion. But what is striking is how much the world changed Sgt. York after the war. He said, “When I went out into that ‘big outside world’ I...realized how un-educated I was and what a terrible handicap it were.”

Through all the glaring fanfare, York’s priority in life was not the fame, title, or fortune, but to make education a priority across the countryside of his boyhood home – the rural Upper Cumberland Valley in Tennessee.

See, as York was growing up, there were no asphalt streets, electricity, or indoor plumbing. He was exposed to such conveniences when he went abroad during the war and initiated these advancements in his community when he returned. The irony is, that even with all these

modern innovations in the advanced societies of that time, such as in Germany & France, they had still devolved into World War.

Despite this, Sgt. York felt it was his post-war duty to make modern improvements and to “train our boys and girls...in the rural sections that have been forgotten for ages. I am giving my life [to] establish a school there.” As a result, York Institute was founded in 1926.

This is truly inspiring. York fought a war that he did not start or want to be part of. And when his heroism was to be celebrated nationally, he chose to return to his local community and improve it instead. He had the opportunity to live anywhere and do many other things, but chose to direct his energy into his hometown.

York gleaned the best of what he saw while he was abroad. And he brought what he learned back into his community and chose to give the next generation a “chance to get a sensible education”. It is noteworthy that he improved his community, lived in his community, and in 1964, died in his community. More than 6000 attended his funeral at a humble cemetery in the small rural area he loved and served.

Next year, as the 100th anniversary of the famous, heroic fifteen-minutes approaches, it is worth pondering the legacy of Sgt. Alvin C York. Will the current inhabitants of the Upper Cumberland and other rural areas in this beautiful countryside continue his legacy of learning from the ‘big outside world’? Will the youth who become “well qualified to take care of our future” bring those innovations back to benefit their hometown? Or will they forget Sgt. York’s example and abandon their rural home to the ruin of time?

In honor of Memorial Day, let’s remember the famous fifteen minutes. Be inspired by the heroism. Treasure the selflessness and service to country. More than that, take the memories one step further. Reaffirm in your lifetime that you too will become the rudder on the ship of your community and improve its course forever.

Thank you, Sgt. Alvin C. York, for your fifteen minutes of heroism and the little-known years of service to your community long afterward.

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