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‘The York Patrol’ Review: Immortal Doughboy

Alvin York’s feats on the battlefield were obscured by movies and mythology, but his heroism under fire was the real thing.



Alvin York during the Battle of Argonne, from a 1919 painting by Frank Schoonover. PHOTO: ALAMY

By Edward Kosner

Feb. 5, 2021 10:42 am ET

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The saga of Alvin York is embedded in the golden age of U.S. military history—the two great wars of the 20th century, long before the endless ambiguous conflicts on the far borders of the American imperium. A red-haired, freckle-faced hillbilly from Tennessee, the acting corporal was credited with almost singlehandedly capturing 132 German soldiers and officers and killing 25 others in a spasm of sharpshooting heroism unmatched to this day. His gallantry on Oct. 8, 1918, helped save the beleaguered “Lost Battalion” and marked a turning point in the Great War that ended barely a month later.

Today, only the oldest Americans have any sense of World War I, though a few film buffs may know of its greatest hero through the corn-pone classic “Sergeant York” (1941), in which a drawly 40-year-old Gary Cooper played the 30-year-old doughboy. Fading memory mists the unparalleled butchery on the Western Front as Allied troops and the hated Boche went “over the top” from their trenches and fox holes to face annihilating machine-gun fire, exploding shrapnel shell and, in the Allies’ case, searing poison gas.

THE YORK PATROL

By James Carl Nelson
Morrow, 274 pages, \$28.99

Besides the movie, there are at least a dozen books about York (including two bestselling ghosted autobiographies) and a state historical site where his farmstead and mill stood in tiny Pall Mall in the northern Tennessee hill country. Now military historian James Carl Nelson has turned out an exhaustively researched but

mercifully compact study called “The York Patrol.” A conscientious work, it’s at once an overwritten and underwritten addition to the York bookshelf.

As the legend is told, York was a kind of rustic Prince Hal, but of sturdy American peasant stock rather than Plantagenet blood. He grew up, Mr. Nelson relates, hunting fox, turkey and varmints with his father. Young Alvin had barely a year of schooling spread over five years, didn’t have a pair of shoes until he was 16, when he stood 6 feet and weighed 160 pounds, and didn’t crack a book until he was 20. He turned into a carouser who could turn a quart of moonshine by himself or with his pals in ramshackle saloons with the Kentucky-Tennessee border painted on the floor (because it was legal to drink only in Kentucky).

But before York surrendered to Satan, a barnstorming evangelist brought him to Jesus.

He quit drinking, smoking, cursing and fighting and became a young elder in the Church of Christ in Christian Union. Then, in 1917, President Woodrow Wilson declared war on Germany and its ally, the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

York’s church believed in the literal truth of the Bible. He reluctantly signed up for the draft but dreaded going to war and being forced to violate the biblical injunction not to kill. His repeated appeals to be classified as a conscientious objector failed and in spring 1918 he wound up in basic training, where two sympathetic superior officers talked him through his reservations. Before long, York—a member of Company G, Second Battalion, 328th Infantry Regiment of the 82nd “All-American” Division of the Allied Expeditionary Forces—found himself more than 4,000 miles from home, on the fringe of the Argonne forest in northeastern France. Many of his new comrades knew of his religious convictions and mistrusted him. Soon enough, they would learn otherwise.

Early on the morning of Oct. 8, the 17 men of York’s unit were ordered to neutralize murderous German machine-gun fire atop a hill at the western edge of the Argonne. Working their way behind enemy lines, they flushed a group of German soldiers sprawled eating in a field, and took 70 or more prisoner. As York assembled them to march back to the allied side, hilltop German machine-guns warned their countrymen to drop and fired into the crowd, killing six Americans and wounding others, including York’s sergeant. York took charge. Crouched in the mud, he picked off the German gunners with his rifle and .45 side arm and then a charging file of counterattackers. With that, the rest of the Germans surrendered. “York, I hear you captured the whole damn German army,” one officer is supposed to have exclaimed.

The author’s description of the action is so detailed and convoluted that I had to reread this portion of his account several times while consulting the book’s single battle map. Finally, I resorted to the old movie on Amazon Prime to better envision what York actually did that epic day. If his battle scenes are hard to follow, Mr. Nelson’s purplish after-action prose can be pretty hard going, too. “And he would remember the steely gray sky,” he writes, “and his assailants silhouetted against the browning October leaves and above all his surprise at his own grim determination, a determination born of a wanton need and desire for survival against all odds . . .”

A magazine article in the Saturday Evening Post sealed York’s fame. Promoted to sergeant, he was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor and the Croix de Guerre. Back in the U.S., he got a ticker-tape parade up Broadway in New York, a suite the Waldorf, and (at his request) a subway tour around the boroughs. Lucrative offers cascaded in to appear onstage and in movies and to endorse products. Unwilling to cash in on his service, he turned them all down and returned to Pall Mall to marry his local sweetheart and take up farming among his people.

The rest of York’s life was inevitably anticlimactic. Over time, some of his old comrades, seeking recognition, tried to chip away at the official version of his exploits. He devoted himself to establishing a first-rate school for the children of his backwoods county and then a religious academy. For all his fundraising for these worthy causes, he was often on the verge of bankruptcy and had to be bailed out by grateful public officials. He got a windfall from his small percentage of the “Sergeant York” box office, but wound up with the IRS on his case. On the eve of World War II, the hero of World War I found himself under attack by another American hero, Charles A. Lindbergh, the America First isolationist and recipient of a medal from Hitler, over York’s fervent support for U.S. intervention against the Axis powers.

Like Gen. Douglas MacArthur’s “old soldier,” Sgt. York faded away—at 76, of a urinary tract infection, at the Nashville VA hospital on Sept. 2, 1964—a month shy of 46 years since his moment of glory.

—Mr. Kosner is the author “It’s News to Me,” a memoir of his career as the editor of Newsweek, New York magazine, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

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