

# Thunder in the Argonne!

## SGT Alvin York and Mission Command

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*American Soldiers manning a 37mm gun support an attack in the dense Argonne Forest of France. The German defenders had turned the forest into a veritable fortress.*

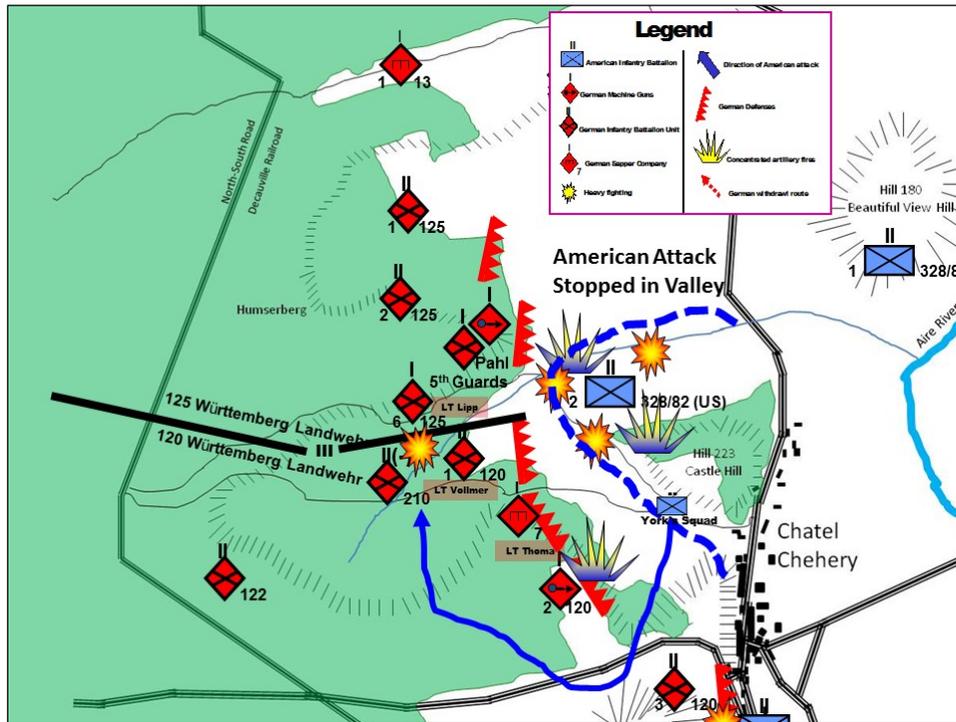
Photos courtesy of Army Heritage Education Center

**Argonne Forest, France — 8 October 1918.** It was another cold and foggy morning along the edge of the rugged Argonne Forest where the 82nd U.S. Infantry Division prepared to launch an attack. Hidden among the trees and hills just a kilometer away from the Americans were four regiments of battle-hardened German soldiers who had orders to not only defeat the American attack, but to follow that up with a counterattack. This notwithstanding, at precisely 0610, the Soldiers of the 82nd Division began their attack. Among the men in this push was CPL Alvin York, a squad leader in the 328th Infantry Regiment. The mission for York's unit was to advance across a valley and then two kilometers into the forest to sever the German supply network in the Argonne. This would force the Germans to abandon their Argonne defensive line and give the Americans a chance to deliver a knockout blow against their stalwart foes.<sup>1</sup>

Initially, the American attack seemed to go well as forward-deployed Germans seemingly retreated in the face of superior numbers. But, this was a ruse, as the Germans merely were falling back into prepared positions and waited for an opportune time to draw the Americans into a brilliantly laid out kill zone. As the Americans continued their advance, they crossed an open valley that was surrounded by thickly forested steep ridges that contained more than 30 German machine guns and hundreds of infantry. Once the Americans were in the midst of the kill zone, the Germans opened fire. This was quickly followed by German artillery ripping gaping holes in the American line.<sup>2</sup>

Among the first to fall was York's platoon leader, LT Kirby Stewart, who was cut down when a spattering of German machine-gun bullets tore into his legs. Although unable to walk, LT Stewart crawled forward encouraging his men to advance. However, a second burst of German bullets hit Stewart, taking his life; he died with his face towards the enemy. As the casualties mounted, the American attack quickly foundered.<sup>3</sup> With no way out, the Americans were trapped and doomed to complete defeat. Of this, York wrote:

*"The Germans got us, and they got us right smart. They just stopped us dead in our tracks. Their machine guns were up there on the heights overlooking us and well hidden, and we couldn't tell for certain where the terrible heavy fire was coming from... And I'm telling you they were shooting straight. Our boys just went down like the long grass before the mowing machine at home. Our attack just faded out... And there we were, lying down, about halfway across [the valley] and those German machine guns and big shells getting us hard."*<sup>4</sup>



**American Attack in the Argonne Forest, 8 October 1918**  
Map courtesy of Josiah Mastriano

The blistering German fire took a heavy toll on the regiment with the survivors seeking cover wherever they could find it. Something had to be done to silence the German machine guns. Remaining in the valley was not an option. With LT Stewart dead, SGT Harry Parsons assumed command of York's platoon. After surveying the situation, he ordered SGT Bernard Early, CPL York, CPL Murray Savage, and CPL William Cutting to advance with their squads to a defile to the south. From here, SGT Parsons surmised, that they just may be able to get behind the German lines and eliminate the machine guns that were holding up the advance.<sup>5</sup>

After dodging German fires, SGT Early steered his 16 men to the defilade, then up a cut in the valley that led behind the German positions. They slowly worked their way around the German infantry until they were spotted by two German soldiers, who were carrying large water containers. Upon seeing the Americans, the Germans dropped the containers and ran to their battalion headquarters to report that the enemy was behind the lines. The Americans instinctively followed.

Arriving on the heels of the fleeing water carriers, the Americans surprised and captured some 70 German soldiers, which included the battalion commander, Leutnant Paul Vollmer. Vollmer, a highly decorated German officer, had lived in Chicago before the war and spoke fluent English. While the Americans tried to line up their prisoners, a machine-gun crew on a nearby hill yelled to the captured Germans to take cover and then opened fire.<sup>6</sup> The blast of bullets killed six Americans and wounded three. York was the only NCO not hit, placing him in charge of the remaining seven men.<sup>7</sup>

With the surviving Americans and German prisoners clinging to the meadow ground, York seized the initiative. He charged up the hill, outflanked the German machine gun and an infantry platoon, killing 19. Seeing a large group of German reinforcements arriving from further up the hill, York decided to go back to his men. As he trotted down the hill, he was spotted by a German officer, Leutnant Fritz Endriss, who ordered a bayonet charge to kill the American. Seeing a platoon of Germans charging, York slid on his side, pulled out his .45 Colt automatic pistol, and began picking off the enemy from back to front. York used this trick in hunting wild turkeys in the hills of Tennessee. There, he learned that if you shoot the lead bird, the rest will see him fall and scatter. By shooting from back to front, the lead Germans had no idea that their numbers were quickly dwindling. Within moments, Endriss was the last German still charging, with York shooting him at point blank range.<sup>8</sup>

Seeing this, Vollmer, who was captured earlier, slowly got up off of the ground and approached York. Standing behind York, he cautiously yelled above the din, "English?" York replied, "American!" In exasperation, Vollmer answered, "Good Lord! If you won't shoot anymore, I will make them give up." Endriss and Vollmer had served together in the German army for nearly a decade, and he was desperate to try to save his life.<sup>9</sup> York shot Endriss in the abdomen, and Endriss was calling out for help. Vollmer saw this as the only way to save his friend's life.<sup>10</sup>

York was not sure what to make of this German officer offering a surrender and cautiously watched as Vollmer pulled out a whistle and blew a command over it. With that, some 30 Germans dropped their weapons on the hill above and made their way down to York and the other prisoners in the meadow. York and his men quickly organized the 100 prisoners into a formation and began marching them out of the forest. During the march back to American lines, the Americans ended up walking into another group of Germans. York shrewdly secured their surrender as well and in the end came out with 132 prisoners. This saved his unit from destruction, thwarted the German counterattack, and allowed the 82nd Division to achieve its objective. As a result, the German army ordered all their forces out of their Argonne Forest fortress, a noteworthy setback for them.<sup>11</sup>

For his heroism, York was promoted to sergeant, awarded the Medal of Honor, and would go down in history as America's most celebrated hero of the First World War. The U.S. Army has helped keep the memory of Alvin York alive by featuring his story in every leadership manual since the 1980s. There are several aspects of the York saga that the U.S. Army has celebrated, which has included his devout religious faith, his high moral standards, and his conviction to do the right thing. With such a foundation, from the U.S. Army's viewpoint, York is the epitome of what mission command looks like for the Soldier.



***CPL Alvin York's group of German prisoners march outside of Varennes-en-Argonne. The three German officers at the front of the formation each played a central role in the 8 October battle. At left is German Leutnant Paul Vollmer, the commander of 1st Battalion, 120th Württemberg Regiment who personally surrendered his unit to York. In the center is Leutnant Max Thoma, commander of the 7th Bavarian Mining Company; he refused to surrender unless Vollmer accepted responsibility. To the right is German Leutnant Paul Lipp, who commanded the 125th Württemberg machine gun that killed or wounded half of the Americans with York. The American in the center of the photo, just behind the German officers, is York.***

Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 6-0, *Mission Command*, defines mission command as “...the exercise of authority and direction by the commander using mission orders to enable disciplined initiative within the commander’s intent to empower agile and adaptive leaders in the conduct of unified land operations.”

“Mission command is one of the foundations of unified land operations. This philosophy of command helps commanders capitalize on the human ability to take action to develop the situation and integrate military operations to achieve the commander’s intent and desired end state. Mission command emphasizes centralized intent and dispersed execution through disciplined initiative.”<sup>12</sup>

It was the execution of disciplined initiative on that October day in 1918 by Alvin York that turned certain defeat to decisive victory. It is such disciplined initiative that the U.S. Army is calling its leaders to instill in our Soldiers, as ADRP 6-0 goes on to describe:

*Leaders and subordinates who exercise disciplined initiative create opportunity by taking action to develop the situation. Disciplined initiative is action in the absence of orders, when existing orders no longer fit the situation, or when unforeseen opportunities or threats arise. Commanders rely on subordinates to act. A subordinate’s disciplined initiative may be the starting point for seizing the tactical initiative. This willingness to act helps develop and maintain operational initiative used by forces to set or dictate the terms of action throughout an operation.*<sup>13</sup>

The key component to this description of mission command is “Disciplined initiative is action in the absence of orders, when existing orders no longer fit the situation, or when unforeseen opportunities or threats arise. Commanders rely on subordinates to act.”<sup>14</sup> This is precisely what transpired when the

German machine gun cut down all the NCOs, except York. Without receiving any further instructions, York knew precisely what to do and thereby changed the course of the battle. ADRP 6-0 does an excellent job describing mission command, and the effects that we endeavor to achieve by it. However, it falls short in two areas:

- (1) How to develop a “culture” of mission command in a unit, and
- (2) What sort of foundation a Soldier needs to be mission command ready.

### **How to Develop a Culture of Mission Command**

As ADRP 6-0 describes mission command, it is largely confined to the realm of tactics and combat. Although that is precisely where mission command is best suited, it should be practiced in all areas of Army life — from the front line to the administrative staff. Mission command should be a way of life for the modern U.S. Army and not something left for a select few at the tip of the spear.

Most Soldiers in the Army tend to fear dealing with pay problems, corrections to assignment orders, and most any other administrative task as it seems the first words uttered by support staff is “no, we can’t do that.” I remember some years ago walking into the housing office at a post, having just arrived, and a staff member glared at me and my family, curtly saying, “What do you need?” The subsequent “support” was just as poor as the attitude of that Department of the Army Civilian: lackluster and frustrating.

Unfortunately, this is normal for some administrative and support offices throughout the Army, where work indeed seems to be a four-letter word. After expending much time and effort, the Soldier tends to get what they asked for earlier on, but was forced to navigate a time-consuming and frustrating bureaucracy confronting an admin staff blocking their every move. This is not what the Army should look like in the 21st century. Shouldn’t ADRP 6-0 be applied to every aspect of Army life? To include the administrative and support staff?

In a time where the U.S. Army is having its resources slashed and force structure reduced, should it not seek to replace unproductive and unwieldy bureaucratic admin staff with a group of energetic and dynamic Soldiers and Civilians who understand the meaning of customer service and exercise the spirit of mission command to provide the troops with timely support. In the spirit of mission command, the phrase, “No, we can’t do that” should be replaced with, “We will do all we can to support your request” and then back it up with positive results. Introducing mission command in the support and administrative realm will no doubt be a significant cultural change, but something that is well overdue.

Exercising mission command in the administrative and support functions, however, is not meant as an excuse to cut corners or to break regulations. There are reasons why rules and regulations exist. Yet, commanders often have discretion, and there are exceptions to the regulations that can be leveraged in certain circumstances. With this in mind, the spirit of mission command is not a license to break the law or to compromise safety, but rather a way to expect Soldiers throughout the Army, whether Infantry or clerks, to seek and exercise efficient ways to accomplish the mission. This will improve the effectiveness of the organization and replace the negative and sluggish attitude with a positive, “can do” view of the mission. This would increase the efficiency and effectiveness of our entire force.

### **Developing your Character Muscles for the Day of Battle**

The Alvin York story is compelling in so many areas. In him we have a person who went from a partier to a church goer, a bar fighter to Sunday school teacher, a hedonist to philanthropist. Of his years of rebellion, York wrote:

*I got in bad company and I broke off from my mother's and father's advice and got to drinking and gambling and playing up right smart... I used to drink a lot of Moonshine. I used to gamble my wages away week after week. I used to stay out late at nights. I had a powerful lot of fistfights.<sup>15</sup>*

The turning point for York was in 1915 during a New Year's Day church service. The change in his life was dramatic and he literally went from being a law breaker to a respected leader in his church in little over a year.

The change occurred in York's life when his friends tried to persuade him to go drinking, but he continually refused. It took a lot of moral courage for York to remain firmly committed to his new life. Although this was not an easy time in York's life, each time he declined to join his friends in their drinking binges, this sharpened his character and moral courage, directly contributing to his heroic deeds only two years later.

Character is like a muscle; the more it is exercised and used, the stronger it becomes. Every time we choose to do what is right, we build character and moral courage. York consistently chose to be faithful in the little things; he constantly made it his habit of choosing to do the right thing. As a result, he was able to accomplish unimaginable feats later in the heat of battle. Our challenge is to exercise moral courage in all of our decisions to develop personal character; which builds our character muscles and enables us to do the right thing in times of distress. As Civil War General Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain said:

*We know not of the future, and cannot plan for it much. But we can hold our spirits and our bodies so pure and high, we may cherish such thoughts and such ideals, and dream such dreams of lofty purpose, that we can determine and know what manner of men we will be whenever and wherever the hour strikes, that calls to noble action. This predestination God has given us in charge. No man becomes suddenly different from his habit and cherished thought.<sup>16</sup>*

As Alvin York did, we must endeavor to build our character and moral courage "muscles" by choosing to do the right thing every day. This will prepare us for the day of battle that lies ahead. Certainly, York was physically courageous on the battlefield because he was morally courageous in his spiritual life. This is the key ingredient of exercising mission command and is personified today in the Army Values of loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity, and personal courage.<sup>17</sup> How else can a Soldier apply mission command unless they have made a daily habit of doing the right thing, of setting aside their selfish desires and instead exercising self-control? These are meant to be the guiding principles for Soldiers to build their character muscles in the manner of Alvin York, so that when the day of fire and trouble arrives, they will know what to do.<sup>18</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Mission command is an idea borne forth by the fire of combat, refined by exercising it in peacetime, and has the potential to make our Army better and stronger as a guiding principle in all aspects of life. The "can-do" attitude personified by the actions of Alvin York in 1918 can likewise improve the effectiveness of Soldiers today, whether at the tip of the spear or in the support chain. Mission command should emerge as a modern-day philosophy for Soldiers across all career fields.

Yet, to truly be effective in the broad application of the ideals manifest in mission command, it takes commitment and a lifelong dedication to doing the right thing. In Alvin York, we see a man, although for a time living a life of dissipation and trouble. Yet, on that cold New Year's Day in 1915, he decided to turn his back on wrongdoing and decided to live life in honor of his newfound faith. By daily choosing to do the right thing, York became a courageous and brave man on the inside. When he found himself alone and in command on that tragic day of 8 October 1918, York knew what to do.<sup>19</sup>

The world indeed seems on “fire” today. Much uncertainty exists, and the likelihood of another war or foreign intervention confronting our nation is a distinct possibility. Yet, there are actions we can take now individually to prepare ourselves for such an eventuality. The Army endeavors to develop Soldiers of character and honor in the manner of Alvin York. We have before us the Army Values and the Warrior Ethos serving as examples of how to begin the process of exercising your character muscle, so that when that day arrives for you to make the difference, you will know what to do.



***CPL Alvin York nervously poses for the camera on the deck of the SS Ohioan after docking in Hoboken, N.J., on 22 May 1919. He had no idea that an April 1919 article in the Saturday Evening Post about his battle exploits had made him a national hero. York was officially welcomed by the Tennessee Society and whisked away to be feted in New York City and Washington, D.C.***

## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Douglas Mastriano, *Alvin York: A New Biography of the Hero of the Argonne* (Lexington, KY; University of Kentucky Press, 2014), 81-85.

<sup>2</sup> G. Edward Buxton, *Official History of 82nd Division American Expeditionary Forces, 1917-1919* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1920), 54-58; National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), College Park, Md., 82nd Division, entry 1241, Records Group (RG) 120; NARA, 328th Infantry Regiment Records, entry 2133, RG 391; NARA, American Battlefields & Monuments Commission (ABMC) files.

<sup>3</sup> NARA, 82nd Division, entry 1241, RG 120; NARA, 328th Infantry Regiment Records, entry 2133, RG 391; NARA, ABMC Division files, 82nd Division, RG 117.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Wheeler, ed., *Sergeant York and the Great War* (Bulverde, TX: Mantle Ministries, 1998), 154-155.

<sup>5</sup> Alvin York, *Sergeant York* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday-Doran, 1928), 221–222.

<sup>6</sup> Gustav Strohm, *Die Württembergishchen Regimente im Weltkrieg 1914–1918, Band 25, Das Württembergische Landwehr Infanterie Regiment nr. 120* (Stuttgart, Germany: Belser, 1920), 163-172.

<sup>7</sup> Mastriano, 88.

<sup>8</sup> CPT Bertrand Cox, affidavit given on 21 February 1919, filed by the 328th Infantry Regiment Advocate General, with actual swearing of the affidavit on 26 February 1919; George Pattullo, "The Second Elder Gives Battle," *The Saturday Evening Post*, Vol. 9, No. 43 (April 26, 1919): 71-74.

<sup>9</sup> Strohm, 163–172.

<sup>10</sup> York, 229.

<sup>11</sup> Strohm, 163–172.

<sup>12</sup> ADRP 6-0, *Mission Command*, (Headquarters, Department of the Army, Washington, DC; 2012), 1-5.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 2-4.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 2-4.

<sup>15</sup> Mastriano, 98.

<sup>16</sup> Alice Rains Turlock, *In the Hands of Providence: Joshua L. Chamberlain and the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina, 1992), 143.

<sup>17</sup> The Army Values, available online at: <http://www.army.mil/values> (accessed 30 December 2014).

<sup>18</sup> Mastriano, 22.

<sup>19</sup> Mastriano, 20-23.

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