

THE CHARACTER OF A LEADER

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Sergeant Alvin C. York was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for his actions on 8 October, 1918, near Chatel-Chekery, France, while assigned to G Company, 2d Battalion, 328th Regiment, 82d Infantry Division. Sergeant York's actions on 8 October were directly attributed to his good and strong character which sets the example for future leaders to follow.

Although the war in the European theater was in progress for over three years prior to direct U.S. military involvement, events began taking place in May 1915 which rapidly accelerated U.S. participation. These events, which eventually led to military intervention, centered on the freedom of the seas. Since the beginning of the war, Britain had been successful in blockading the German coastal areas. This blockade forced the German fleet to be bottled up within the Baltic Sea and ports throughout the world, thus stopping any type of logistical resupply from outside countries. It was this blockade which forced the German use of unrestrictive submarine warfare to hopefully break the logistical stranglehold perpetuated by Britain.

This use of unrestrictive submarine warfare eventually led to the sinking of the neutral ship Lusitania in May 1915. The Germans were insistent that this type of warfare was essential to their country's survival. In reality, this view was true, based on the deteriorating economic situation within Germany.

American reaction to the Lusitania incident came in the form of harsh criticism of German sea warfare conduct. This criticism was based on the feeling that German policies governing sea

warfare were being dictated to neutral countries. Nevertheless, unrestrictive sea warfare continued with the eventual sinking of the Arabic and Sussex in 1916. Once again, the American government protested this conduct with the threat of military intervention by U.S. forces in the European continent. Because of this threat, in March 1916, Germany pledged to allow U.S. shipping to pass freely through the established sea war zones.

From March 1916 until January 1917, the U.S. enjoyed free travel throughout the seas to the East. But on January 31, 1917, urged by the clamor of the German people for retaliation against the English blockade, Germany went back on her pledges and declared unrestrictive use of the submarine. This reversal of policy led to U.S. severing diplomatic relations with Germany on 3 February 1917, and eventual declaration of war on 6 April 1917.

With the declaration of hostilities in April 1917, the U.S. began mobilization of its armed forces. The 82d Infantry Division began assembling on August 25th, 1917, at Camp Gordon, Georgia. Most of the drafted personnel who comprised this division were from the states of Alabama, Georgia, and Tennessee. By November 1, 1917, 28,000 men had entered Camp Gordon and been incorporated into the extensive training regime required for future battles on the European frontier. After initial mobilization and training, the 82d was moved to Liverpool, England from May 7 through 17, 1918.

After movement to Liverpool, England, the 82d made its first moves onto the European continent in June 1918. It was on June 25, 1918, that the 82d began relieving units of the 26th Infantry

Division in the Lagney sector of the Western trenchline. It was during this time that the 82d conducted numerous small raids of the German trenchlines and received its initial blooding.

From June until September, the 82d was continually moved in and out of the front lines. Most of the battles by this unit were conducted in the Marbache sector of the line, where success was achieved in numerous operations during the St. Mihiel offensive. By September 24, 1918, the 82d was moved off the front line to become the 1st Army Reserve in the vicinity of Varennes, France. It was from this position that the 82d was given the mission to attack on 6 October 1918 to relieve pressure on the U.S. 1st Infantry Division. The disposition of the U.S. forces consisted of the 28th Division holding a portion of the line to the left of the 1st Division. The U.S. 5th Corps was to the right. The 1st Division, due to its recent success, had advanced about one kilometer forward of the 28th Division and the 5th Corps creating a salient in the U.S. lines. Although the 1st Division's success was tremendous due to the nature of the fighting at this time, it was in jeopardy because of deadly German enfilading fire being received by the left brigade of the 1st Division. To relieve this pressure, the 82d was given the mission to pass through the 28th Division and attack in a westerly direction between Chatel-Chehery and Cornay. The purpose of this mission was to destroy enemy opposition which was jeopardizing the salient created by the 1st Division.

The 82d launched its attack by the 1st Division. Initial gains by the 82d included Hill 180 and 223 which were seized by

the 327th Regiment which was the initial main effort in the attack. After this key terrain was seized, the 328th Regiment was passed through into fairly open terrain where it met stiff German resistance. Under tremendous opposition, the 328th continued its advance, capturing the Decauville railroad, and relieving pressure on the left flank of the U.S. 1st Division.

It was during this attack that one man exhibited the good and strong character essential for an effective leader. Sergeant Alvin C. York was born and raised in the mountains of Tennessee. As a youth, York was known as a wild hellraiser with a particular hankering for moonshine, fighting, and gambling until he fell in love with a church going girl who refused to date him unless he changed his ways. York eventually began reading the Bible and adopting its fundamental teachings as his values.

With the advent of World War I, York applied for release from the draft as a conscientious objector based on his religious beliefs. This request was denied, and he was assigned to Company G, 328th Infantry Regiment. Because of his religious beliefs, York was unsure whether or not he could kill enemy soldiers. Based on these convictions, York confronted his company and battalion commander with his set of values and it was determined to send York home to settle his inner turmoil. York went home for two weeks and deliberated over the moral questions which were tearing him apart. Finally, he reached the decision that for him, the highest moral good was to go to war with Company G.

York's decision had great consequences when on October 8, 1918, at 0610 hours, his company began its attack toward the

Decauville railroad. Hidden in the woods overlooking a valley, a German machinegun battalion opened up on the company, killing most of its forward ranks. York became a part of a 17-man detail ordered to seek out and destroy the machineguns. During movement, the detail pursued two Germans into thick underbrush and suddenly burst into an open space which was the location of the enemy battalion headquarters. Startled by this movement, many of the Germans began to surrender. It was at this time that German soldiers began reversing their positions and began placing accurate and deadly fire on York's detail. Of the initial 17 men following York, only himself and seven privates survived the deadly fuselage. While the seven privates scrambled into the brush, York, still surrounded by some ready-to-give-up Germans, crouched in the mud and quickly began firing with his Springfield. Because of York's proximity to the surrendering soldiers, German gunners could not hit York without wounding some of their own men. Germans who did attempt to kill York were quickly shot by York himself. York eventually fired 17 times and 17 enemy soldiers died. Finally, German officers on the hill sent eight men charging York with bayonets. York had used up all his rifle ammunition, but he took out his pistol and shot all eight, firing from rear to front. This onslaught was too much for a German major who was lying on the ground near York. The German promptly said that he would order his men to surrender if York would stop shooting. This action by York eventually led to 132 prisoners who were herded into the 2d Battalion headquarters. Investigations later found that an addition 25 Germans had been

killed in the fighting, and 35 machineguns were put out of action.

York's actions on 8 October exhibited what a man of strong character can accomplish. Incorporated within this character were certain personality traits which had a direct impact on the outcome of the battle. One of these character traits was York's competence and expertise in rifle marksmanship. This expertise was essential during the fighting, as was exhibited by the destruction of an entire enemy machine gun battalion.

In addition to York's marksmanship abilities, his strength in character was reinforced by the absence of character flaws such as indecision, cowardice, and selfishness. This eventually led to York's actions being consistent with his personal and professional values.

Another important aspect in Sergeant York's story lies in the strong leadership traits exhibited by York's superiors. During York's discussion of his personal values and beliefs, the company and battalion commander made a wise and compassionate decision to send York home to work out his personal dilemma. This decision was important because it showed how a leader, by a simple action, can salvage a soldier with tremendous qualities. It shows that leaders have a real influence on the beliefs, values, and character of their subordinates.

York's story clearly demonstrates the value of one person with strong character traits. In addition, it shows how traits such as expertise in marksmanship and compassion by leaders can have an invaluable impact on the battlefield. To be successful,

leaders must incorporate these traits inherent in their own soldiers, and utilize them to the best of their ability to complete assigned missions.

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