

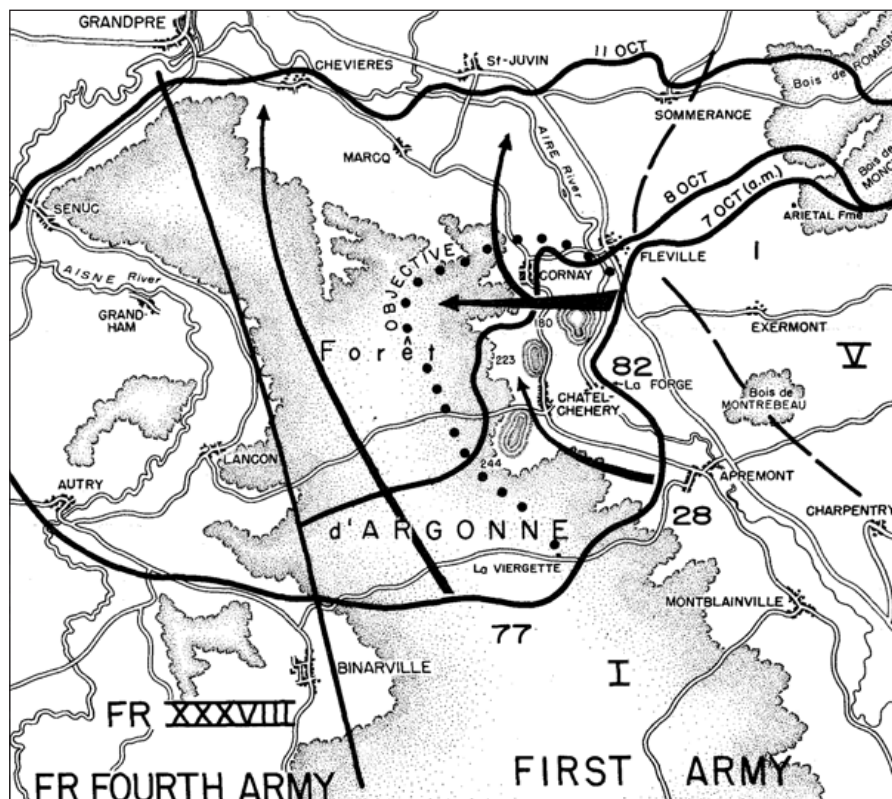
Forgotten Soldiers: *The Other 16 at Chatel-Chéhéry*

JAMES GREGORY

During the Meuse-Argonne Offensive on the early morning of Tuesday, 8 October 1918, near the village of Chatel-Chéhéry, France, a 17-man patrol from Company G, 2nd Battalion, 328th U.S. Infantry Regiment, 164th Brigade, 82nd Division, American Expeditionary Forces (AEF), moved through a foggy and devastated battlefield with the mission to out-flank the German lines. While advancing towards the enemy, these Americans surprised a large contingent of German soldiers and captured many of them after a short but bloody engagement that came at a cost of six Americans killed in action and four wounded in action.

Even though the patrol suffered greatly in the firefight, only one member received national acclaim and the lion's share of recognition for his actions that day — PFC (acting CPL) Alvin C. York.¹ He was credited with single-handedly capturing 132 German prisoners and killing more than 25. For his actions that morning, York was initially awarded the Army Distinguished Service Cross (later upgraded to the Medal of Honor), the French Military Medal, and French Croix de Guerre, WWI w/Palm, the Italian War Merit Cross, and other foreign decorations for valor. However, Alvin York was not alone that day. The 16 other men who were there with him during the engagement played a very important role in the fight as well. However, their stories have largely been neglected or forgotten by both authors and military historians alike. Some of them, such as CPT (acting SGT) Bernard Early and PVT (acting CPL) Otis B. Merrithew, accomplished or assisted with the deeds that York was credited with. Eventually, some received acknowledgment of their roles that morning, but others did not.

There were many acts of heroism performed by countless AEF servicemen while in the French Theater of Operations in 1918. Unfortunately, many, if not most, of these have been lost to history. This is exactly what happened to



Plan of Attack of U.S. I Corps, Meuse-Argonne Operations, 7 October 1918 (United States Army in the World War, 1917-1919, Military Operations of the American Expeditionary Forces)

the other 16 Infantrymen there at Chatel-Chéhéry, France, with York. The battle's succession of events and even its very location are constantly argued by historians. It is impossible to tell a complete and accurate tale of this engagement due to the discrepancies in affidavits, both American and German. In 1929, CPT Henry Swindler discovered that "the statements of various people concerned are quite conflicting" when trying to commemorate the battle.² Therefore, this article uses the rule of consensus. In reading the various accounts of the American survivors through interviews and affidavits, if at least three men agreed on an event, it is included. The focus is on the accounts of the other men besides York to gain a new perspective into the battle. For the Germans, I had access to the report translated by the U.S. Army War College in 1936. This document conflicts with other German statements, showing the deeper complexities of recreating the battle. Nevertheless, this decision created a story that I feel more accurately retells the battle than has previously been told.

The other 16 Soldiers who played a part in the fight were:

CPL (acting SGT) Bernard Early

CPL Murray L. Savage

PVT (acting CPL) Otis B. Merrithew (who served under the alias **William Cutting**)³

PVT Percy Peck Beardsley

PVT Patrick J. Donohue

PVT Maryan Edward Dymowski

PVT Thomas Gibb Johnson

PVT Joseph Stephen Kornacki (frequently spelled as Konotski)

PVT Mario Muzzi

PVT Michael A. Sacina

PVT Feodor Sok

PVT Carl Frederick Swanson

PVT Nedwell 'Fred' Wareing

PVT Ralph Weiler

PVT George W. Wills

PVT William E. Wine

Early on the morning of 8 October, men of the 328th U.S. Infantry Regiment were ordered to push through the Argonne Forest near the village of Chatel-Chéhéry. From their jump-off positions, they began their attack at approximately 0600 while advancing into a thick ground fog. They advanced with the 164th Brigade, consisting of the 327th U.S. Infantry Regiment on the right flank, the 328th U.S. Infantry Regiment in the center, and the 110th U.S. Infantry Regiment (from the 55th Brigade, 28th Division, AEF) on the left flank, all advancing towards their objective. Unfortunately for the Americans, the preceding artillery barrage and the expected advance of the 110th U.S. Infantry Regiment never materialized.⁴ Nonetheless, the Americans continued to advance with little resistance



PVT Otis B. Merrithew (aka "William Cutting")
(Photo courtesy of Merrithew Family)



**PVT Joseph S. Konotski taken in 1929
(Photo courtesy of Dave Kornacki)**

for about 700 meters when suppressing enemy machine-gun fire from the front and both flanks enveloped the 328th U.S. Infantry Regiment.

While leading his platoon from the front, 2LT Kirby Stewart was hit in both legs from a burst of enemy machine-gun fire. With both legs completely shattered, the determined lieutenant crawled forward and encouraged his men to continue the attack until another bullet struck him in the head, killing him instantly. The command of the platoon then fell to the platoon sergeant, SGT Harry Parsons.⁵ After surveying the situation, Parsons ordered Early, an acting sergeant, to lead three squads around the left rear flank of the enemy to silence those positions.⁶

At around 0800, the 17-man patrol advanced through the valley and woods to get in behind the German lines. Early was in charge of the patrol. Savage oversaw the squad with Dymowski and Weiler. Merrithew led his squad with Wareing, Sok, Sacina, Donohue, Wills, and Wine. York was in command of a Chauchat automatic rifle squad consisting of Swanson, Muzzi, Beardsley, Kornacki, and Johnson.⁷

After advancing about 150 yards, they came across a small stream where they halted and listened for movement in the underbrush. Sensing the presence of someone, one of the men shouted out requesting identification. After a few tense moments, a German soldier darted from his hiding place. Shortly after, another rushed out. The Americans fired their weapons but missed as the lead German tripped and both finally made it to the cover of the woods. After waiting a few minutes, Early split his force into smaller groups and continued the advance forward.

They advanced slowly until Early's group stumbled upon a German encampment. These enemy soldiers belonged to the Prussian 210th Reserve Infantry Regiment and had laid down their weapons to eat breakfast, putting them in no hurry to do anything or be on alert.⁸ Early's squads converged around the unsuspecting Germans and opened fire. Approximately 15 Germans immediately fell. Seeing that the Germans were unarmed, Early ordered the men to cease fire. This surprise firefight caused the Germans to surrender to the men, believing they were a part of a larger American force. The Germans were tired after hiking all night to their positions, and the morale of the troops was very low at this point in the war. *The Journal of the 2nd Landwehr Division*, the German unit present at the battle, states that "our men gradually have lost every vestige of morale."⁹ Among the first men captured were Lieutenants Paul Vollmer, who is often cited as a German major by the Americans, Karl Glass, and Fritz Endriss, who had been inspecting their company's defensive positions. They were closest to York and sent to join the rest of the prisoners.

Early then ordered York and his squad to keep the Germans under cover while the others disarmed them. The Americans lined up the Germans into two rows. The numbers vary, but the consensus of the men puts this number at 80-90 Germans who surrendered to Early's patrol. Early then searched the front rank with Merrithew searching the second. One of the officers surrendered his pistol to Merrithew as they were lining them up. Early then walked over to Kornacki to tell him to keep close to the Germans on the march back to the American lines.¹⁰

Unfortunately, before he could finish his sentence, the 4th and 6th Companies of the 125th Württemberg Landwehr Infantry Regiment that were placed on the hill above the men noticed the commotion below.¹¹ On seeing this, they signaled the captured Germans to lay down. The prisoners immediately dropped, and the Württembergers opened fire on the unknowing squad with a single machine gun.¹²

Early fell with several wounds. Although severely wounded, he remained conscious and passed command to Merrithew.¹³ Six other Americans were killed in the same machine-gun burst: Savage, Dymowski, Swanson, Wareing, Weiler, and Wine. Muzzi was wounded through his shoulder and crawled to safety. Merrithew returned fire with the other men around him but was soon wounded in the arm. Determined, he continued to fire back at the enemy using his automatic pistol. He never lost consciousness nor relinquished command of the patrol during the engagement. Beardsley took cover behind an oak tree and returned fire with his Chauchat automatic rifle, accounting for several Germans. York took cover in a clump of bushes beside a tree. Kornacki took cover as best he could and began firing with his rifle. Wills moved close to the German prisoners and used his bayonet to stop them from moving. Sok and Sacina also watched the German prisoners knowing that being close to them was the only way to avoid direct fire from the hill.¹⁴ The Americans fought the Germans for approximately 15-20 minutes.

During this intense firefight, York, having been the farthest from the prisoners and closest to the Germans on the hill, moved into a better firing position. From his vantage point, he managed to kill several Germans while they focused their fire on the other men. Beardsley, who was near York, continued firing his Chauchat automatic rifle until he ran out of ammunition as both of his ammunition bearers had been killed beside him.¹⁵ Beardsley then pulled out his service pistol and continued firing at the attacking Germans. Together, Beardsley and York killed or wounded several more Germans on top of the hill.

Since the other German prisoners were exposed to the fire in the open, while the Americans used cover behind trees and in holes, the German machine-gun fire wounded and killed some of the prisoners. Seeing this, Vollmer called for those still firing to cease fire and surrender. The Germans on the hill obeyed and surrendered to the Americans. Just after the initial firefight finished, German Lieutenant Max Thoma and a platoon of his men attached to the 120th Wuerttemberg Landwehr Infantry Regiment, who had been hurrying towards the shooting, burst through the woods with bayonets fixed. As soon as they erupted from the wood line, they were quickly stopped by the Americans, and Thoma had no choice but to also surrender.¹⁶



This U.S. Army Signal Corps photo taken in February 1919 shows the graves of four of the Soldiers from the 82nd Division who were killed during operations near the village of Chatel-Chéhéry, France, on 8 October 1918.



Secretary of War James W. Good congratulates CPL Bernard J. Early after he received the Army Distinguished Service Cross on 5 October 1929. (U.S. Army Signal Corps photo)

Merrithew was still standing and in charge of the patrol, despite having been wounded. He had three bullet holes in his helmet, his gas mask was shot off, and a can of corned beef in his back pocket was smashed by bullets.¹⁷ He had suffered a few wounds to the left arm but only one severe enough to require an operation.¹⁸ Merrithew ordered his men to line up the prisoners into column of twos and march back to the American lines. At this time, Beardsley wrapped his overcoat around the wounded Early and, along with Donohue, began carrying him back towards the rear.¹⁹ However, they quickly handed Early over to two Germans so they could better guard their prisoners.

To get back to safety, the men and their prisoners had to march through the German front line. They made Vollmer march at the front of the line with York threatening his life if he did not get the other defenders to surrender. As he walked, York held a pistol at the small of Vollmer's back. On the way towards American lines, the men encountered more German soldiers who were made to surrender by command of Vollmer. Their large mass of prisoners made them an easy target for enemy observers. An artillery barrage forced the men and their columns to rush towards the American lines. During this movement, a piece of shrapnel caught Donohue in the left shoulder.²⁰

When the patrol exited the woods and arrived back to American lines, they ran into other members of Company G, including 1LT Joseph A. Woods, battalion adjutant of the 2nd Battalion, 328th U.S. Infantry Regiment, USAR, and Parsons. At this point, York walked at the head of the column while the other men walked along each side of the prisoners. Merrithew walked along with the column "yelling like a mad man" in charge with bullet holes in his helmet and blood running down his wounded left arm. The more seriously wounded Early was still carried by German prisoners.²¹ Early was taken from the Germans and placed on a stretcher. He had a hole in his back so large his kidney was visible.²²

Upon seeing the wounded American Soldiers arrive, Parsons took Merrithew back to the temporary 2nd Battalion aid station to have his wounds dressed. When Merrithew returned, he found that Woods had placed York in command of the prisoners and ordered him to take them back to the regimental headquarters. However, before York headed back towards the regimental rear area, Woods gave him five more men from another platoon of Company G to act as additional guards because of the large number of prisoners. Merrithew and Early accompanied the surviving members of the patrol until they reached a road. At this point, Merrithew, Early, Donohue, and Muzzi were loaded into field ambulances and taken back to the rear for further medical attention.²³

York then took the surviving members of the patrol along with the German prisoners, 132 all told, back to the 82nd Divisional prisoner pen. Upon arriving there with the prisoners and being the only NCO, albeit an acting one, left in the group, York was credited with the capture. With the large group of prisoners and the rumors that followed afterwards, the legend of York spread throughout the entire AEF until George Pattullo, a reporter from the *Saturday Evening Post* wrote the article "The Second Elder Gives Battle" that brought widespread attention to York's actions. The other 16 Soldiers who were there with York were not given their due recognition in Pattullo's article and were all but forgotten in later versions of the story.

For the "Other 16" who were there during the engagement at Chatel-Chéhéry on 8 October 1918, four of these Soldiers — Beardsley, Kornacki, Wills, and Donohue — were officially cited for gallantry in action in General Orders No. 1, Headquarters, 164th Brigade, 82nd Division, AEF, American Expeditionary Forces, dated 4 May 1919 and were each awarded a Silver Citation Star Certificate which entitled them to place a small silver star on their WWI Victory Medal (which was later converted to the Silver Star Medal by War Department Directive, dated 19 July 1932). Sacina was also commended for gallantry in action at Chatel-Chéhéry in General Orders No. 11, Headquarters, 328th U.S. Infantry Regiment, 164th Brigade, 82nd Division, AEF for his actions on the morning of 8 October 1918.²⁴ Despite these recognitions in 1919, these men were still left out of the official story.

On the afternoon of Saturday, 5 October 1929, while at the U.S. Army War College in Washington, D.C., former CPL Bernard Early was (after more than 10 years and with help from the American Legion) presented the Army Distinguished Service Cross for his leadership and handling of the 17-man patrol during their attack and capture of more than 80 German prisoners of war.²⁵ In February of 1945, Donohue applied for and received his Silver Star. Forty-seven years after the events that occurred on 8 October 1918, Merrithew, who fought in the engagement under the alias of William Cutting, was awarded the Silver Star by MG Charles S. O'Malley in a simple ceremony held at the Post Headquarters Building, Fort Devens, MA, on the afternoon of 26 September 1965.²⁶

Even with these recognitions and honors, the "Other 16" have fallen to the wayside in the legend of Alvin C. York. Those brave American Soldiers also played important parts that fall morning in the Argonne, but their roles were forgotten in iterations of the story. While it is not possible to know the exact details of the engagement, we must also discuss these men in the context of the 8 October 1918 battle to ensure a correct historical analysis.

Notes

¹ I have chosen to use their designated ranks at the time of the engagement.

² David D. Lee, *Sergeant York: An American Hero* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1985), 39.

³ He chose to serve under an alias so that his mother would not discover that he registered for the draft.

⁴ Scott Chandler, *History of the Three Hundred and Twenty-Eighth Regiment of Infantry, Eighty-Second Division* (Atlanta: Foote and Davies, 1920), 43.

⁵ Douglas Mastriano, *Alvin York: A New Biography of the Hero of the Argonne* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2014), 99.

⁶ History of the Three Hundred and Twenty-Eighth Infantry, 45.

⁷ Michael Kelly, *Hero on the Western Front: Discovering Alvin York's WWI Battlefield*, (Frontline Books, an Imprint of Pen & Sword Books Ltd., 2018), 24.

⁸ "Testimony of German Officers and Men about Sergeant York," translated by the U.S. Army War College, Carlisle, PA, June 1936, 14.

⁹ *Ibid*, 9.

¹⁰ "New Haven Sergeant May Share Honors of 'Greatest War Hero' with Alvin York," *Hartford Courant*, 26 September 1920.

¹¹ Mastriano, *Alvin York*, 105.

¹² "Testimony of German Officers and Men about Sergeant York," 19.

¹³ "New Haven Sergeant May Share Honors," *Hartford Courant*.

¹⁴ Kelly, 57-60.

¹⁵ "Percy Beardsley's Claim to Honors," *Hartford Courant*, 29 May 1927.

¹⁶ "Testimony of German Officers and Men about Sergeant York," 21.

¹⁷ "Sgt. York Heroism Shared," *Independent*, 20 September 1965.

¹⁸ Capt. Frank E. Pike, "Clinical Record Brief," Evacuation Hospital 28, 16 October 1918.

¹⁹ Kelly, *Hero on the Western Front*, 60.

²⁰ "War Hero Eager to See Himself Portrayed in Movie of Exploit," *The Evening Tribune*, 29 November 1941.

²¹ "Guilford Boy Reveals Real Inside Story of Sergt. York's Heroism," *Hartford Courant*, 23 February 1920.

²² "Georgia Buddy Says Sergeant Early Hero of Argonne Forest Engagement," *Hartford Courant*, 22 August 1935.

²³ "Merrithew Says He was Leader," *The Boston Globe*, 3 October 1929; "War Hero Eager to See Himself Portrayed in Movie of Exploit," *The Evening Tribune*.

²⁴ "Then and Now," *The American Legion Monthly*, Vol 2, No. 5, May 1927, 57.

²⁵ "Sergt. Early is Awarded Hero's Medal," *Hartford Courant*, 6 October 1929.

²⁶ "Sgt. York Heroism Shared," *Independent*.

James Gregory is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Oklahoma.

The author thanks **SSG (Retired) Steven C. Girard**, a U.S. Army unit historical officer, for his invaluable research and help through the writing process. His enthusiasm and relentless push for what actually happened on 8 October 1918 has proven integral to telling the full story.