To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Sandra Lee Stephens entitled "The Role of the Press in Popularizing a World War I Hero--Sgt. Alvin C. York." I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science, with a major in Communications.

Willis C. Tucker, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Accepted for the Council:

Vice Chancellor
Graduate Studies and Research

THE ROLE OF THE PRESS IN POPULARIZING A WORLD WAR I HERO--SGT. ALVIN C. YORK

A Thesis

Presented for the

Master of Science

Degree

The University of Tennessee

Sandra Lee Stephens

August 1974

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author would like to thank Professor Willis C. Tucker and Professor James E. Kalshoven of the College of Communications and Dr. Allison Ensor of the Department of English for their help and encouragement in the writing of this thesis.

Appreciation is also expressed to Mrs. Dona Hiser for her assistance and to Mrs. Jo Blan LaRue, Mrs. Gladys Stephens, Mrs. Shirley Allred, Kenneth L. Turner, and Coyle Harris for their help, interest, and encouragement.

1165637

ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to show by tracing the historical development of the story the role of the press in making Sgt. Alvin C. York the most popular hero of World War I.

Issues of newspapers and magazines from March 22, 1919, to June 15, 1919, were examined on microfilm for stories about the hero. Included were three New York newspapers, six Tennessee newspapers, and two national magazines. With the New York Times Index as a reference, every item about York printed in the Times from 1919 until his death in 1964 was also examined to determine how the image created in 1919 was maintained.

Individually the stories were examined for (1) the image of York presented, (2) variations in the image or facts from article to article or publication to publication, (3) perceived attitude of the writer, (4) story elements emphasized in the headline, (5) photographs used, (6) story length and position in the publication, and (7) borrowings from previously printed material.

Since such stories were frequent at that time, newspapers gave no special treatment to the March, 1919, release that described York's feat and announced his award of the Congressional Medal of Honor. Not until April, 1919, when the Saturday Evening Post printed an article about York written by George Pattullo did newspapers begin to show interest in the Tennesseean. Pattullo established the heroic image, and the elements of York's life and character that Pattullo emphasized are the ones emphasized

repeatedly in York publicity. The Pattullo influence is obvious in the homecoming publicity that appeared in New York newspapers upon the hero's arrival from France in May, 1919. The Tennessee Society of New York, the moving force behind the large reception given York in that city, and General George B. Duncan, commander of the 82nd Division, were the first York promoters in the sense that they encouraged and aroused the interest of the press in the hero.

Tennessee newspapers were stimulated by the Pattullo article and the New York publicity, by state pride, by York's visits to three major Tennessee cities, and by the activities of various York promoters, including Governor A. H. Roberts. Little is added to the York image in the Tennessee press that had not been established by either Pattullo or the New York press.

Coverage in the New York Times after 1919 shows an increasing acceptance of York as one of America's great men. York's life, as depicted in the Times, was a series of paradoxes and a mixture of triumphs and tragedies. But he retained his title, the "greatest" hero of World War I, to the end.

Evidence shows that the press made York the most popular hero of the war by emphasizing not the uniqueness of his feat--his singlehanded killing of 20 Germans and capturing of 132--but the "human interest" elements of his story--his religion, his patriotism, his devotion to his mother, his special qualities as a man, and his colorful background. From these elements the press created the "Sergeant York" image that became a symbol of American ideals and virtues.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	AMERICA'S HERO OF WORLD WAR I	1
	The Alvin C. York Story	1
	Research Methods	7
	The Reporting of World War I	8
II.	INTRODUCTION TO THE AMERICAN PUBLIC	18
	The Chase Article	19
	The Pattullo Article	24
III.	THE NEW YORK PRESS	33
	The New York *Times*	36
	The New York *Tribune*	45
	The New York *Herald*	51
IV.	THE TENNESSEE PRESS	60
	The Prearrival Publicity	63
	Stories of the Arrival and New York Reception	66
	Stories of the Hero in Tennessee	69
	Editorials	79
	The York Promoters	81
V.	YORK IN THE NEW YORK *TIMES* AFTER 1919	88
	York Agricultural Institute	88
	Challenges to the Legend	92
	Film Fame and War Fever	96

CHAPTER PAGE

Illness and Financial Woes 103

A Final Tribute 108

VI. THE MAKING AND MAINTENANCE OF "SERGEANT YORK" 112

BIBLIOGRAPHY 120

VITA 123

CHAPTER I

AMERICA'S HERO OF WORLD WAR I

I. THE ALVIN C. YORK STORY

In November, 1917, a plain, 31-year-old mountain man reluctantly left Fentress County, Tennessee, headed for Camp Gordon, Georgia, and from there to France and World War I.

He was more than six feet tall, a red-haired man, a reformed hellraiser, turned elder in the church, turned conscientious objector. He had "got religion," and did not want to fight. He had said so himself in a letter to President Woodrow Wilson. His pastor and his widowed mother were making every possible appeal to the draft board to prevent Alvin Cullom York from being forced to go to war. They wanted to keep him in the mountains where he could farm his mother's few hilly acres, teach Sunday school, and marry the girl he had chosen, Grace Williams. To do those things was all Alvin York wanted now. His drinking, fighting, and gambling days were finished, and he wanted to settle down. Now this war that he did not understand had interrupted his life, and he was troubled by the contradictions between what he was being told by the United States government--that he must go and fight--and what he found plainly stated in his Bible--that it is wrong to kill.

At Camp Gordon York's superior officer, Capt. E. C. B. Danforth, proved to be quite knowledgeable of the Bible and persuasive as well. He interpreted the Scriptures in a different way from York and tried to

make him see that war was occasionally quite proper. Perplexed and deeply troubled, York was sent home on a 10-day furlough to think over the problem. He took a train to Crossville, Tennessee, and walked much of the 50 miles from there to his home in Pall Mall. He went up on a mountain and prayed for two days, and when he came down, he had his answer--he was going to war, and he was coming back alive. He felt assured of that.

In May, 1919, Alvin C. York returned a second time to his home in Pall Mall, but this time he did not have to walk. He brought with him some 40 Allied and American decorations for heroism, including the Congressional Medal of Honor, the Distinguished Service Cross, the Distinguished Service Medal, the Croix de Guerre, the French Legion of Honor, the Medaille Militaire, and the Italian War Cross. He brought with him also offers of thousands of dollars to appear on the stage or in motion pictures, a $10,000 offer from the New York Herald for a short autobiography, and the incessant clamor of newspapers for information. Reporters met him when his troopship landed at Hoboken, were omnipresent during his stay in New York and Washington, and accompanied him home to Pall Mall and later on his wedding trip to Nashville. For a time after his arrival in this country, no detail about Sgt. Alvin C. York's life and background was too insignificant to print and no acquaintance of his too remote to quote in a newspaper story.

Large crowds waited to greet him as his train pulled into the Tennessee towns of Knoxville, Chattanooga, Rockwood, and Harriman. When at last he arrived at Crossville, bankers and lawyers from the Fentress

County seat of Jamestown met him at the railroad station with a caravan of automobiles and took him in style over the almost impassable road to Pall Mall. Nothing was too good for the most popular hero of the war, for the man who had received the greatest reception ever in New York for an individual soldier returning from a war. That reception would not be surpassed until 1927 when Charles Lindbergh returned from flying across the Atlantic. Nothing was too good, Tennesseans thought, for the man who had put their state on the map, who had made people in New York and Washington realize that Tennessee still had people made from the same mold as the pioneers, as the great men of history such as Davy Crockett and Andrew Jackson.

Of the 95 Congressional Medal of Honor winners in World War I, Alvin C. York is the one on whom the American people and the American press conferred the status of legend and the only one whose glory survived in some degree until his death in 1964. The others--men like Lt. Samuel Woodfill, whom General John J. Pershing called the greatest soldier of the AEF--have been forgotten or were never known.[1] In some minds the names of Eddie Rickenbacker and William J. Donovan, also Medal of Honor winners, may still be associated with heroism in that war. But their names have never been surrounded by the mist of legend that still clings to the name of Alvin C. York.

His name came to mean everything that has traditionally been part of the romantic ideal of American manhood--love of mother and country,

---

[1]Joseph L. Schott, Above and Beyond: The Story of the Congressional Medal of Honor (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1963), pp. 97-99.

bravery, physical strength, religious conviction, modesty, humility, expert markmanship, and fighting ability.

The story of what York did on October 8, 1918, in the Argonne Forest in France, has been retold in poetry, newspapers, biographies, and a 1941 Warner Brothers motion picture. The facts basically are these: A party of 17 men of the 82nd Division was sent on what seemed a suicide mission to destroy German machine guns that were raking a valley with fire from a hill above and preventing an American advance. The party stumbled into a German headquarters camp and captured several prisoners. But suddenly the machine guns above them opened fire, and all but eight of the Americans were wounded or killed. York was now in command. The remaining Americans fell to the ground and attempted to shield themselves with the prisoners they were guarding. York was caught out in the open, but the German gunners did not seem able to hit him, although they were ripping up dirt and bushes on both sides of him. When heads came up to sight the guns, York shot them with his rifle. When a squad of seven Germans charged him with fixed bayonets, he shot them with his Colt .45. Altogether he killed at least 20 Germans, and some estimates go as high as 28. None of York's men fired a shot after the battle began in earnest, according to their sworn statements, although they did help him round up and escort out of the area the 132 prisoners he acquired in the process of silencing 35 machine guns.

In pinning the Croix de Guerre on York, Marshal Ferdinand Foch was quoted as saying York's was the single greatest feat of the war by an individual soldier. General John J. Pershing was frequently quoted in print as saying that York was the war's greatest "civilian" soldier.

In his autobiography General Pershing put York's name second to that of a career soldier, Lt. Samuel Woodfill, in his account of the Meuse-Argonne offensive.

> Deeds of daring were legion. It is not intended to discriminate in favor of those whose heroic services have been recognized. There were thousands of others who bore themselves with equal gallantry but whose deeds are known only by the victorious results they helped to achieve. However, as typifying the spirit of the rank and file of our great army, I would mention Lieutenant Samuel Woodfill, 5th Division, who attacked single-handed a series of German machine gun nests near Cunel and dispatched the crews of each in turn until reduced to the necessity of assaulting the last detachment with a pick; Sergeant Alvin C. York, of the 82nd Division, who stood off and captured 132 Germans after his patrol was literally surrounded and outnumbered ten to one; and Major Charles W. Whittlesey and his men of the 77th Division, who, when their batallion was cut off in the Argonne, refused to surrender and held out until finally relieved.[2]

General Pershing chose Woodfill, York, and Whittlesey to serve as pallbearers of the Unknown Soldier in Armistice Day ceremonies, 1921.

Of Lieutenant Woodfill, Joseph L. Schott says, "He was as fine a sharpshooter as York and because of his long military experience was twice the soldier. He never received as much publicity as the 'civilian' soldier-heroes and apparently never sought any."[3]

While Sergeant York was being cheered at the New York Stock Exchange and in the Congress of the United States, and reporters were reporting whether or not he got a manicure when he went to a barber, not all returning soldiers were as enthusiastic about York as the general public

---

[2]John J. Pershing, My Experiences in the World War (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1931), II, 392.

[3]Schott, p. 99.

was. A letter to the editor of the Chattanooga Times is typical of the adverse reactions to the public's adulation of York. The writer, a former soldier from Chattanooga, objects to "the singling out of Sergt. Alvin C. York of Pall Mall as the only hero of the war or the greatest hero of the war." Others, he said, served longer and did as much:

> The soldier Loman (Cpl. Berger Loman, 33rd Division) has all the decorations that York has and two more and there are others who have the same yet the people of their homes, either town or state are not eulogizing them, honoring, banqueting them as they have York and I am of . . . the . . . opinion that it is an injustice to the numerous other heroes who have gone through three times the service and did as much when all summed up as Sergt. York.[4]

Whether York deserved the attention he got is not an essential question in this study. To show how magazines and newspapers drew the attention of the nation to Sergeant York through the hundreds of stories printed about him is its primary goal. Without the publicity he received, the man probably would have taken his medals home to Pall Mall and lived quietly the rest of his life on the edge of poverty. But he was somehow in the right place at the right time doing the right thing. The press made him a public figure and, therefore, a man different from the one who had left for the war. He became restless and dissatisfied with the hardships of mountain living and determined to use his name for the benefit of his mountain neighbors.

How the print media made Sergeant York the most popular hero of World War I may be seen by tracing the evolution of the story historically as it appeared in selected newspapers and magazines in the spring

---

[4]The Chattanooga Times, June 15, 1919, p. 20.

of 1919. In addition to showing how one particular heroic image was created by the press, this study may put new light on the character of the wartime and postwar American press, the character of the American reading public, and the character of the hero himself.

II. RESEARCH METHODS

The major research task involved the finding and examining of stories about Sergeant York in the following newspapers: the New York Times, the New York Herald, the New York Tribune, the Knoxville Journal and Tribune, the Knoxville Sentinel, the Chattanooga Times, the Nashville Banner, the Nashville Tennessean, and the Commercial Appeal, Memphis.

Issues between March 22, 1919, when York's name was first mentioned in the announcement of his recommendation for the Medal of Honor, and June 15, 1919, when most of the "homecoming" publicity had ended, were methodically searched. These limits encompass the flurry of publicity that preceded York to America from France, greeted him on his arrival, and surrounded him while his own state paid tribute to him. This publicity formed the basis for what the American people were to remember about York and established him as a public figure.

In addition, all the stories printed about York in the New York Times through his death in September, 1964, were examined to determine the direction and character of the post-1919 publicity. The Times was chosen for this study because of the convenience of its Index and the fact that it was sufficiently removed from the fervor of the loyal Tennessee press to present an undistorted picture of the prominence of York's name in the national news columns.

Individually the stories were examined for (1) the image of York presented, (2) variations in the image or facts from article to article or publication to publication, (3) perceived attitude of the writer, (4) story elements emphasized in the headline, (5) photographs used, (6) story length and position in the publication, and (7) borrowings from previously printed material.

III. THE REPORTING OF WORLD WAR I

Sergeant York's name came to prominence out of a new and different kind of war. Long before the American Expeditionary Forces began arriving in France in mid-1917, American newspaper and press association correspondents had seen the brutal war machinery in action or at least the destruction it left in its wake.

But few of the correspondents perceived the significance of the war or even questioned it. Just as it was York's first experience at war, some of the reporters sent abroad in the war's early years were novices as well, not only to war but to reporting. They were poorly educated in world affairs, having spent their history courses in ancient Greece or Rome, as was typical in high schools and colleges of that period. "Most of us had to educate ourselves in the ways and structure of this new strange world as we went along," said Will Irwin, correspondent for Collier's.[5]

---

[5]Will Irwin, The Making of A Reporter (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1942), p. 245.

The going along was fun and adventure for most of the correspondents. They were seeing this historic clash of powers, or the effects of it, firsthand but not very objectively. Most of them saw the war as a Biblical conflict between Good and Evil and assumed everyone knew already who was on which side.[6]

Irwin said editors expected interest in the war to wane within a few months and sent the youngest, least experienced reporters to Europe keeping the seasoned reporters at home.[7]

Arriving in London August 11, 1914, the advance guard of American journalists found the doors to the battlefield locked to correspondents and the British tight-lipped on the whole situation. Both the British and the French had learned in previous wars that the enemy often can glean important and potentially dangerous information from uncensored newspaper accounts. The Allies were determined this time to keep a clamp on the press. In an attempt to quiet the impatient clamor for news, however, the British issued daily a brief, carefully worded communique that offered little real news.[8]

Correspondents had little choice but to send their dispatches by the British wire at the mercy of the British censors since that country

---

[6]George Seldes, Tell the Truth and Run (New York: Greenburg, 1953), p. 42.

[7]Irwin, p. 245.

[8]Emmett Crozier, American Reporters on the Western Front 1914-1918 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), pp. 98-99.

had taken the liberty of cutting Germany's cable to America.[9] The British influence and control on American news was almost absolute. The few American correspondents who were already abroad when the war broke out had frequently covered the European scene from London, writing "background" from British newspapers and magazines. Often these correspondents had been in London so long they had acquired the British point of view.

Exasperated at the government restrictions, the London newspapers began piecing together bits of information and virtually fabricating major battle stories. British officials who protested the inaccuracies were told it was their fault for not allowing correspondents in the battlefields. Finally the British came to understand that the way to stir the sympathies and war passions of America was through the news columns.[10]

In April, 1915, Frederick Palmer, an American representing the Associated Press, United Press, and International News Service, and six British correspondents were accredited to accompany the British Expeditionary Forces to France. Censorship was heavy-handed, and the correspondents were not allowed freedom of movement. Palmer and the others learned quickly where the line was drawn on military secrecy, and rarely was anything deleted from their copy. They preferred to restrict their

---

[9]Frank L. Mott, American Journalism (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1962), pp. 615-616.

[10]H. C. Peterson, Propaganda for War (Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1939), pp. 6, 26.

dispatches to information that was sure to pass.[11] Anything the slightest bit risky or borderline in a dispatch the censors usually killed to avoid having to spend time contemplating a decision. The French censors were even less sympathetic than the British, according to Wilbur Forrest.[12]

By 1915 some 500 American correspondents were reporting from various European capitals to newspapers, magazines, and press associations back home.[13] Complaining that the stories lacked freshness and authenticity, critics accused the correspondents of gleaning their material from bars and restaurants. The reporters countered with the argument that they were getting as close to the fighting as military authorities allowed.

Even when they were allowed on the battlefield, correspondents spent most of their time studying maps, listening to officers talk, and reading reports in an attempt to tie bits of information together.[14] If they actually saw fighting, it was by accident or a breach of the rules that could get a reporter barred from the front.[15]

---

[11]John Hohenberg, Foreign Correspondence: The Great Reporters and Their Times (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), pp. 216-217.

[12]Wilbur Forrest, Behind the Front Page (New York: D. Appleton-Century Co., 1934), p. 110.

[13]Edwin Emery, The Press and America (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1972), p. 519.

[14]Crozier, pp. 114-115.

[15]Mott, p. 619.

The AEF arrived in France in mid-1917 with a press section composed of 12 correspondents. In the course of the war 40 to 60 correspondents were accredited to the AEF. Preference was given to representatives of major press associations and chain newspapers. Each publication or agency represented was required to file a $2,000 bond and deposit $1,000 with the War Department for expenses. The sum would be forfeited if the rules were violated.[16] Major Frederick Palmer, chief AEF censor, had a difficult job, for while American correspondents did not want to aid the enemy, they were reluctant to hold important news for long.[17]

The censorship rules were drawn up by George Creel's Committee on Public Information and were "voluntarily" subscribed to by newspapers, press associations, and individual reporters.[18] Correspondents sent by hometown newspapers to report on hometown doughboys were restricted from using names so that the Germans would not know which outfit was where. As a solution to that problem the reporters sometimes invented "picturesque characters and activities for them."[19]

Edward Fibbons said that in the first months after the arrival of the AEF the correspondents were "herded together like a group of . . . tourists and conducted to the front by American and other Allied officers

---

[16]Crozier, pp. 126-127.

[17]Hohenberg, pp. 216, 237-238.

[18]James Robert Mock and Cedric Larson, Words That Won the War (New York: Knopf, 1940), p. 12.

[19]Raymond Tompkins, "First Page Stuff: 1918," American Mercury, XX (August, 1930), 474.

and interpreters."[20] Later, however, the correspondents' lot was considerably improved when they were given a freedom of movement at the front that had never existed with the British and French armies.

Looking back on their war dispatches in later years, many correspondents expressed disillusionment with the war in general and with their own reporting in particular. Some of them were ashamed to have soldiers return home and read what they had written.[21] Major Palmer said he had led a double life, having been "'cast for the part of a public liar to keep up the spirits of the armies and the people of our side.'"[22] Pointing to the lack of realism in the reporting, Raymond Tompkins, who served the Baltimore Sun during the war, wrote in a 1930 article that the AEF prohibited all stories about the drinking and petty stealing the American soldiers were guilty of occasionally. "Whatever was sent home had to deal with the more inspirational aspects of the war and since such aspects of the war were hard to find they had to be invented; or things totally uninspiring had to be tricked out as news and inspiration blown into them."[23]

Having learned what pleased the censors and what kinds of stories would pass complete, the American correspondents "went on exuding larger and larger gobs of slush," although they often thought they were producing some worthy material, Tompkins said.[24]

---

[20]Edward Gibbons, Floyd Gibbons (New York: Exposition Press, 1953), p. 75.

[21]Hohenberg, p. 216.

[22]Tompkins, p. 476.

[23]Ibid.

[24]Ibid.

George Seldes characterized the correspondents he knew as having "no social conscience . . . and not even a social thought. So far as I know, no one cared a damn about anything at all except getting the news, preferably getting it first, and not necessarily getting it too objectively or too truthfully."[25]

Telling the truth about the defeat of any of the Allied forces was forbidden in the AEF Press Section. Defeat became a strategic withdrawal or a planned occupation of new territory. Wilbur Forrest called the American World War I correspondent "a sort of glorified disseminator of official military propaganda."[26]

On occasion the United States government employed established professional writers to polish and gloss over the harsh realities of war news. They wrote glorifying descriptions of the land and sea battles with glamor replacing the blood and destruction. These accounts were then broadcast by government wireless.[27]

Besides the censorship and outright fabrication of stories, perhaps the major obstacle to realism in the war news was the view of the American soldier held by most correspondents and the people back home. One general picture was as follows: The American soldier was born to fight and was so eager for battle he could not be held back. In any fight with Germans, Americans were invariably outnumbered five or ten to one but always came away victorious and with fewer casualties than

---

[25]Seldes, p. 41.

[26]Forrest, p. 108.

[27]Ibid.

the enemy. The whole war was like a big picnic to Americans. In fact, it was hard to keep the wounded from jumping up and returning to the thick of the fight. The Americans liked to play with French children almost as much as they liked to kill Germans. And their favorite French drink was lemonade.[28]

To the correspondents the American Negro soldier was a big joke, and most reporters always had a good "coon" story to tell, usually in their dispatches. Said Tompkins, "The American Negro under shellfire was always as funny as a cornfield darky in a storybook."[29]

The romanticized image of the American soldier, which was reinforced by the generals, was almost universally adhered to among the correspondents. Those who did not have the image when they arrived soon picked it up.

Few if any Americans wanted realism in the war reporting. They did not want to be forced to think about the significance of this war. In fact, they were often hostile to the journalists who suggested near the end of the war that the situation of the Allies was less than ideal.[30] The Creel Committee created by President Wilson to advertise the war effort has been blamed for creating the stereotyped thinking of the period. But whatever misinformation the Committee on Public Information may have included in its publicity campaign, the ideas were shared by the majority of Americans, most of whom truly believed or wanted to

---

[28]Tompkins, p. 477.

[29]Ibid.

[30]Ibid.

believe that Americans were saving civilization in this war to end wars.[31]

Early in 1918 the AEF correspondents were given freedom to print names of casualties as well as the activities of troops on the line. Those few who chose to could even go over the top with the soldiers.[32] But even if censorship was relaxed, the problems of communication were as troublesome as ever. It was always difficult to get to the front and get back to telegraph offices in time to meet a deadline. The wires were often busy with official messages, and the news dispatches had to wait.

At no time during the war was the problem so great as during the Meuse-Argonne offensive that would eventually bring Alvin C. York's name to prominence. Webb Miller called this battle the hardest of the war for reporters. The wet weather turned the two roads in and out of the forest into channels of mud. Trucks hit by shellfire blocked traffic for hours so that the correspondents either could not get to the front lines or could not get back to telegraph their dispatches. Press headquarters were in Bar-le-Duc, the closest village to the battle area with telegraph facilities, and the Americans kept pushing farther away, making the situation increasingly difficult for the correspondents.[33]

---

[31]Mock and Larson, p. 6.

[32]Crozier, pp. 196-197.

[33]Webb Miller, I Found No Peace (New York: The Literary Guild, 1936), p. 88.

There was no correspondent with the 82nd Division on October 8, 1918, when Alvin York captured the German machine gun battalion and took 132 prisoners. Although the story was spread among the troops by word of mouth, the 82nd Division was to spend 20 more days in the Argonne Forest before coming out to file official reports. Professional military men doubted the truth of what they had heard about York, who was then a corporal.

The official story was put together from reports filed by the seven witnesses to the event and York's commanding officers who covered the hill inch by inch in an attempt to understand what happened and how. Sam Cowan, a biographer of York said:

> Major-General George B. Duncan, commander of the Eighty-Second Division, and officers of York's regiment knew that history had been made upon that hillside. By personal visits of the regiment's officers to the scene, by measurements, by official count of the silent guns and the silent dead, by affadavits from those who were with York, the record of his achievement was verified.[34]

Major-General Duncan became, in a sense, Sergeant York's first press agent. It was the general who told the story first for publication in the American press, and there is evidence that the first important and most influential story ever printed about York was written under the supervision of the 82nd Division commander and was subject to his approval.

---

[34]Sam Cowan, Sgt. York and His People (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1922), p. 46.

CHAPTER II

INTRODUCTION TO THE AMERICAN PUBLIC

In his 1921 biography of York, Sam Cowan says America was "ready" for the hero on his return from France in May, 1919:

> The story of the man had run ahead--his fight in the forest, that had added to the cubic stature of the American soldier; the artlessness of his life and the genuineness of his character, which as yet showed no alloy; the modest becoming acceptance of illustrious honors paid to him in France. The people saw in this simple, earnest mountaineer the type of American that had made America.[1]

Actually, York's story had not "run" far ahead. It preceded him to this country by two months at the most, after the very first mention of him by the press. The "complete" story was not publicized until a month or less before his arrival.

Until more than five months after York had fought his battle, Americans knew nothing of him. On March 22, 1919, many newspapers used a story issued by the War Department that General John J. Pershing had recommended award of the Congressional Medal of Honor to a Tennessee corporal. People who saw the story very likely paid little attention to it unless they knew the man personally. Stories of decorated soldiers were plentiful during the first months of 1919.

But then in April two magazines printed stories about York's exploit. The one that is assumed to have reached the newsstands first,

---

[1]Cowan, pp. 269-270.

the April issue of World's Work, contained a brief mention of York at the end of a 17-page article by Army artist Joseph Cummings Chase. With some foresight but not much accuracy, the editors had titled the article "Corporal York, General Pershing, and Others."[2] Apparently, they recognized a budding public figure. The other story, a 6,000-word piece by seasoned correspondent George Pattullo, appeared as the lead article in the April 26, 1919, Saturday Evening Post. At that time the Post, with a circulation of 2,000,000, was the most popular magazine in America.[3]

I. THE CHASE ARTICLE

Joseph Cummings Chase has been credited with "discovering" York. In the summer of 1941, at about the time Warner Brothers released the motion picture Sergeant York, a writer for the New Yorker interviewed Chase about his association with the hero. The published article contains some factual errors but tells briefly how Chase happened to paint York's portrait and how George Pattullo first heard the hero's story.

The article said Chase had been commissioned by the War Department to paint portraits of notable members of the AEF for use in a publication called the War Department Record. On a night in October, 1918, Major-General George B. Duncan sat for him at field headquarters at Bar-sur-Aube, France. The general told Chase about York and insisted

---

[2]Joseph Cummings Chase, "Corporal York, General Pershing, and Others," World's Work XXXVII (April, 1919), 636-653.

[3]Theodore Peterson, Magazines in the Twentieth Century (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1964), p. 13.

that the artist paint the corporal's portrait. Chase consented, and Duncan sent for York later that night.

"As he worked," the New Yorker said, "he drew York out and got his complete story."[4]

Sometime later, according to the article, Chase happened to meet the Saturday Evening Post correspondent George Pattullo. After hearing York's story from the artist, Pattullo found York, interviewed him, and

> . . . presently a story called "York's Battle" appeared in the Saturday Evening Post. At about the same time a piece by Mr. Chase . . . appeared in World's Work, "The Story of York." The whole thing astonished the high officers of the AEF no end.[5]

As given in the New Yorker, both story titles are incorrect. "Corporal York, General Pershing, and Others" was the only Chase article mentioning York that appeared in World's Work. Pattullo's article was titled "The Second Elder Gives Battle."

Chase's article is composed of six pages of type and 12 full page portraits of General Pershing, seven other generals, a sergeant, and one other corporal besides York. The subtitle promises "character sketches" of the men in the portraits. Not until the final two thirds of the last page does the section about York appear. It is subheaded "General Duncan's 'Conscientious Objector.'"

If, in fact, Chase "drew York out and got his complete story," it is not evident in the 41 words that Chase devotes to his personal

---

[4]"Mr. Chase and the Sergeant," The New Yorker XVII (July 12, 1941), 10-11.

[5]Ibid.

encounter with the corporal. The story of York's exploit is quoted directly from General Duncan. No more than 50 words of description are given to General Duncan until Chase says that on the night of the sitting he was "much interested in the exploit of a corporal from the Tennessee mountains."[6] The remainder of the article except for the two final paragraphs is devoted to Duncan's account of the battle.

As Chase reports it, the general begins his tale with this remark: "'His exploit . . . is the most remarkable I have heard of in the whole war. Pretty good, too, for a "conscientious objector."'"[7] The general reportedly "paused to chuckle" over that last term.

The general's "chuckle" and Chase's use of quotation marks indicates the degree to which the term "conscientious objector" was taken seriously in the initial publicity about York. When it was used at all, it meant, as in this article, that York had to be "set straight" by his superiors about the morality of war. Duncan said in this article that York "did not resist the draft." Pattullo makes the same claim and does not use the term "conscientious objector" except to describe members of York's religious sect. York did, however, request exemption and was denied it by both his local draft board and his district board.[8] He appealed the denials to no avail. He probably could have been assigned to some noncombatant post if Captain Danforth had not convinced him at last of the rightness of killing Germans.

---

[6]Chase, p. 648.

[7]Ibid.

[8]Tom Skeyhill, ed., Sgt. York: His Own Life and War Diary (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, Doran, 1928), pp. 155-160.

Possibly General Duncan did not know about the requests for exemption. Possibly he did know and wished to conceal the facts because of the stigma of cowardice or lack of patriotism associated with such requests. Perhaps he thought having all the facts publicized might spoil York's chances of becoming a national hero. York himself denied, until much later, that he had requested exemption.

As quoted by Chase, General Duncan described this extraordinary character from Tennessee as a "tall, rawboned mountaineer with a red face and red hair." Duncan said York "'got religion' previous to the war, and although he had 'toted' a gun ever since he could carry one and was an expert squirrel shot, he now had a fixed conviction that it was wrong to kill."[9]

After briefly relating how York was "converted" to war by his captain, Duncan launches into the battle story. His version, as reported by Chase, is disjointed and bears little resemblance to the sequence of events in later versions. As reported here, York "charged" a machine gun nest, "captured it and took several prisoners," then proceeded to another nest where he:

> ". . . unlimbered his weapon, and, in his old-time manner as a squirrel hunter, aimed his rifle fire at the enemy machine gunners.
>
> "I asked him afterward how many shots he had fired, and he said 'about twenty-four times' . . . [A]fter the encounter we found that twenty-four dead Boche were his bag. In fact, the fight only ended when the officer in charge of the German machine guns offered to stop the machine gun fire if York would stop his rifle fire. . . . Another remarkable fact is that

---

[9]Chase, p. 648.

> Corporal York delivered his prisoners to the nearest battalion headquarters, which was not his own, and that at his own headquarters he made no mention of the affair. It was only by accident that the story came to his own commander from the adjacent battalion some time later. . . ."[10]

In spite of General Duncan's lack of information about the events of the battle and his error in saying that York "charged" the machine gun nest, some of the most important elements to appear in later stories are established in this brief account: (1) The man himself is depicted as extraordinary because of his physical characteristics, his skill with a rifle, and his modesty about his accomplishments. (2) The paradox of his religious conviction and his having to be "converted" to war with his slaughter of Germans is emphasized. (3) The German major is depicted as having to bargain with York to get him to stop shooting. (4) His feat is proclaimed the most remarkable of the war.

Noticeably absent from this account is an explanation of how York managed to capture and escort 132 prisoners out of the area. The number of prisoners, in fact, is not emphasized. It is York's deadly aim that is held to be remarkable.

Apparently Chase was unpracticed in the subtle art of making heroes, for in the final two paragraphs he ruins the heroic image he has allowed Duncan to build, sacrificing it for an amusing note on which to end his article. The following is all Chase said about his personal encounter with York:

> Later in the evening Corporal York appeared in obedience to an order to have his portrait painted. I asked him if he were married.

---

[10]Ibid.

> "No," he answered slowly, with his Southern drawl. "I was always a kind of a mommer's boy."[11]

Although the hero has turned into a backwoods simpleton, Chase has added still another element to the story--York's devotion to his mother, which would be one of the themes most emphasized in his homecoming publicity.

That final quotation is also used in the cutlines under York's portrait:

> A "conscientious objector" from the Tennessee Mountains who recovered from his pacifism sufficiently to kill with his rifle a machine gun nest of twenty-four Germans and capture 132 German soldiers and four officers. This General Duncan pronounced as the "greatest single exploit of the war." "I was always a kind of a mommer's boy," Corporal York told Mr. Chase.[12]

In May, 1919, when the Tennessee Society gave a banquet for Sergeant York at the Waldorf-Astoria in New York, Joseph Cummings Chase was one of the dignitaries who sat at the speaker's table with him.

II. THE PATTULLO ARTICLE

Chase may have discovered York with help from General Duncan, but the real heroic image was built by a writer more expert in the art. As a correspondent for the Saturday Evening Post, George Pattullo had been accredited to the AEF since American troops first arrived in Europe in 1917. The 40-year-old Pattullo was one of the most experienced war correspondents sending dispatches to America.[13] After the Armistice in

---

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Who's Who in America XVI (Chicago: The A. N. Marquis Company, 1931), p. 1733.

November, 1918, he was sent to Germany for the Post, and, according to General Duncan, he returned to France especially to get York's story.[14] "The Second Elder Gives Battle" was written probably in January or February, 1919.

Through the mingling of facts, a bit of romanticizing, and much personal opinion, Pattullo creates for Americans an image of the outstanding hero of the war. Pattullo must have known what he was doing or at least what was expected by the officers who gave him the results of their investigation. They thought it was the greatest feat of the entire war, and they knew that if Pattullo presented the facts in the right way, all America would think so.

Pattullo apparently agreed with the officers about the importance or uniqueness of York's feat. In fact, he does not attempt to restrain his own enthusiasm throughout the article. He must have been surprised to find an American soldier who fit so readily the romanticized image prevalent in the wartime press. Perhaps that is the reason he glorified the man as well as the exploit. That this American had been equal to more than 20 Germans was a matter of official record. Moreover, he had a personal life that sounded like a work of fiction. And over all was the suggestion of the miraculous. What better story to climax a war reporting career?

From the beginning of the article Pattullo makes his purpose clear. He intends to praise the man Alvin C. York as well as the battle he fought. He gives the reader fair warning in the second paragraph:

---

[14]The New York Herald, May 24, 1919, p. 1.

> He outfought the machine gun battalion with his rifle and automatic pistol. There were seven other Americans present at the fight, but it was York's battle and only York's. But for him not a man of them would have come out alive except as prisoners. In my estimation it stands out as the greatest individual feat of the war, not only because of the amazing things he did that day but because of the man's deep religious convictions and scruples. For though York joined the army when drafted he remained troubled for months, and it was only after his captain had laid his doubts by quoting biblical authority for taking up the sword that he saw his duty clearly. Once his conscience was at ease the second elder went in for fighting in earnest--and he surely did one fine job.[15]

High in the story Pattullo draws his own portrait of the hero. Where Duncan saw a "rawboned mountaineer," Pattullo saw "a whale of a man" and more:

> Once he wore a shock of red hair; now it is clipped close as becomes a soldier, but it still flames like a headlight. His features are not rugged, but clear-cut, and his habitual expression is one of kindly humor; but whenever he is stirred to resentment, his eyes contract and take on the peculiar high and piercing quality of the hawk's. I suspect that the second elder would be a bad hombre in a mix-up.
>
> Have you ever seen a gunman of the old Southwest? A real gunman, not the loud, quarrelsome, spurious saloon hero? Well, that's York. The same rather gentle voice in ordinary conversation with a vibrant note when he is stirred that fairly trumpets danger; he has the same gray eyes, flecked with brown--eyes which harden to pin points. And he has the same unhurried, half-indolent confidence of manner. In his steady gaze is absolute sureness of self.[16]

Thereafter, for the first two thirds of the story, Pattullo illustrates York's virtues:

(1) The corporal's poise was unshakeable even while he received the praise of a superior officer:

---

[15]George Pattullo, "The Second Elder Gives Battle," The Saturday Evening Post CXCI (April 26, 1919), 3.

[16]Ibid.

York stood there, unflustered, looking him straight in the eye as one man to another. To him had been given the honor of carrying the colors that day. Never once did he do the wrong thing, though he was several times in situations about which he had received no instruction.[17]

(2) His intuition and instinct seemed infallible.

This Tennessee mountaineer seems to do everything correctly by intuition; army officers who have been over the ground where he fought assert that no amount of military training could have improved his tactics, yet with York it was entirely the working of instinct. . . .[18]

(3) He abstained from the traditional habits of soldiers.

"And now you neither drink nor gamble? You don't even swear?"

The answer came like the crack of a whip. "No, sir; I play the game straight."[19]

(4) He was modest about his accomplishment.

In telling it he was far more prone to leave out than to amplify; men who do big things seldom like to talk about them, and are never fluent.[20]

(5) He loved his country.

. . . and he was not going to back out of serving his country when it was drawn into war. As with a great man other courageous men, patriotism was stronger in the Tennessee mountaineer than any other impulse.[21]

(6) He had faith and religious conviction.

He could not reconcile killing his fellowmen with the teachings of the Saviour.[22]

"Somehow I knew I would'nt be killed," he said. "I've never thought I would be--never once from the time we started over here."[23]

---

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid., p. 4.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid.,

[23] Ibid., p. 73.

(7) He had a "rought and tumble" past that seemed so thoroughly American it too was almost virtuous.

> "Yes, I used to drink and gamble some. I went all the gaits. But when I got to drinking I was kind of liable to fight, and it was like to get me into a right smart of trouble. . . . A feller does a heap of things he's ashamed of later, don't he?"[24]

(8) His love for his mother caused him to reform.

> "My mother used to beg me to quit drinking," he said. "Often she would follow me out to the gate and beg me not to drink any more. So one day when she cried I told her I was through. And I haven't touched a drop since."[25]

The denial that York asked exemption from the draft is particularly emphatic in this article. It occurs in the first paragraph and at two other points in the story. His fellow church members are said to have tried to persuade York to ask for exemption, but he refused because of his great patriotism.

Pattullo saves the battle story for the end, dramatizing it with swirling mist and scenes of soldiers stopping to listen for an enemy footstep as they creep in single file through trenches.

Some elements in Pattullo's version differ from other versions, in particular those told in York's biographies and reportedly taken from War Department records.

The first inconsistent element is the old, abandoned trench which, Pattullo says, the 17-man party entered and followed over the crest of the hill in an attempt to get behind the Germans. Only one other account examined for this study included mention of a trench.

---

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid., p. 4.

When the party got out of the trench onto a path, Pattullo says, they came upon two German stretcher bearers with Red Cross arm bands. One stopped and gave himself up. The other fled. York's official statement reported by Skeyhill says both stretcher bearers fled.[26]

Crossing a stream in pursuit, the group stumbled into a German headquarters camp where 20 or 30 surprised Germans, including a major, surrendered. At this point Pattullo reports an exchange between York and the major that other accounts have placed elsewhere:

> Surrender they did, the whole outfit, including the major in command of the battalion.
> "What are you? English?" he asked.
> "Americans," answered York.
> "Good Lord!" said the major.[27]

That exchange in every other account where it is included has been placed during the thick of the battle when the German major told York he would have his men surrender if York would stop firing. It is always construed to be the major's expression of amazement that an American could shoot so well.

The machine guns above the Americans and their prisoners had swung around and opened fire. With six of his comrades dead and three wounded, York was in command. He began to shoot with his rifle and to shout "Come down." The Germans were aiming high to keep from hitting their own men who were stretched out on the ground under guard by the seven other Americans.

---

[26]Skeyhill, p. 225.

[27]Pattullo, p. 71.

York kept knocking down heads every time he fired, and soon a detachment of seven Germans led by a lieutenant charged him. At this point comes both an inconsistency with later versions and a quotation very much out of character for York. The first paragraph of the quotation is probably fabricated.

> "I had my automatic out by then, and let them have it. Got the lieutenant right through the stomach and he dropped and screamed a lot. All the boches who were hit squealed just like pigs. Then I shot the others."
>
> "You killed the whole bunch?"
>
> "Yes, sir. At that distance I couldn't miss." He killed this detachment before they could charge twenty yards downhill--eight men.[28]

Subsequent accounts in both newspapers and biographies have used this incident to illustrate York's superb military tactics drawn from a technique used in hunting wild turkeys. He shot the last man first as they came down the path and then the others down the line one by one so that none of the party every knew the others were hit. According to Pattullo's account, York shot the leader first and then the others.

After York had killed the eight-man detachment, Pattullo said, the German major offered to make the others surrender. Then York and his men escorted the prisoners out, taking other machine gun nests as they encountered them.

In the course of his story, Pattullo makes a statement that might be interpreted as either an accusation or a confession, but it anticipated the criticism that would be leveled at the reporting of World War I in years to come.

---

[28]Ibid., p. 73.

> . . . men who do big things seldom like to talk about them and are never fluent. This would be a useful fact to remember when next you listen to the outpourings of alleged war heroes. So many are newspaper made; the soldiers over here could explode many a bubble reputation at home.[29]

Pattullo strives toward believeability throughout his article, assuring the reader that the story is genuine and that the facts have been checked, not only by him but by military officers. He offers frequently his personal judgments of York and his exploit:

> The end of a week's investigation left me convinced that Corporal York had performed the most remarkable individual feat of fighting to the credit of the American Expeditionary Forces.[30]

> Nine hundred and ninety-nine thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine men out of a million would have considered the situation hopeless. The millionth man was Corp. Alvin C. York.[31]

> . . . you cannot meet York without feeling a profound respect for his sincerity and rugged strength of his faith.[32]

And near the end of the article Pattullo adds a final explanation for York's incredible feat:

> We stood long beside the graves in silence. At last I said: "I still cannot understand, even now, how any of you came out alive."
>
> York replied, simply but earnestly: "We know there were miracles, don't we? Well, this was one. I was taken care of--it's the only way I can figure it."[33]

Although General George B. Duncan is not mentioned in Pattullo's story, the general referred to Pattullo in a speech at the Tennessee Society's banquet for York held May 23, 1919, in New York. This is the New York Herald's account of it.

---

[29]Ibid., p. 3. [30]Ibid., p. 4.

[31]Ibid., p. 73. [32]Ibid., p. 4. [33]Ibid., p. 74.

> "As to the facts of Sergeant York's exploit, they are already in your possession as you have all read of them adequately in the public press and more specifically in the article by George Pattullo in the Saturday Evening Post."
>
> General Duncan then related how the correspondent came back from Germany to France especially to get York's story, and how he was cautioned to get every detail absolutely accurate as "they must go down in history."[34]

When Sergeant York passed through Knoxville on his way to be mustered out at Fort Oglethorpe, he also mentioned the article to his crowd of admirers, perhaps revealing the true role of General Duncan in its preparation. The Knoxville Sentinel reported it this way:

> "Have you read that story in the Saturday Evening Post?" Sergt. York inquired.
>
> "Yes!" came a chorus from the crowd.
>
> "Well that is an accurate account of the story. It was taken from the military officers. The commanding officer would not let it be published unless it was taken from the military records and affadavits of officers who were acquainted with the facts were first secured by Passalo [sic]."[35]

---

[34]The New York Herald, May 24, 1919, p. 1.

[35]The Knoxville Sentinel, May 29, 1919, p. 1.

CHAPTER III

THE NEW YORK PRESS

The first indication of York's feat in any newspaper was the March 22, 1919, announcement of his having been recommended for and awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. Both the New York Herald and the New York Times used the item, but neither gave it any special treatment. The Times ran the announcement on page 6 under a one-column, three-line head, "Congress Cites Corporal// Tennessean with Seven Men Took/ 132 Prisoners and Machine Guns." The Herald gave the item a one-column headline on page 3, "Soldier Who Captured 132/ Wins Congressional Medal of Honor." The wording of the story is the same in all the newspapers examined for this study. As quoted in the item, General Pershing's cabled recommendation gives a version of York's feat similar to the one attributed to General Duncan in Chase's article. York is said to have "charged" the machine gun nest while leading seven men. There is no suggestion in the story that the accomplishment was virtually singlehanded. The Herald headline gave the corporal more credit than did the story itself. The other New York paper examined, the Tribune, did not use the announcement.

Since announcements of decorations for soldiers were being issued almost daily by the War Department, neither the Times nor the Herald had reason to anticipate further publicity about the Tennessean. Before June 16, 1919, however, the Times would print 13 more items about York,

totaling approximately 85 inches of space, and a half-page layout of pictures. The Tribune would use six stories, totaling approximately 124 inches, and five pictures. And the Herald would run 17 more items, totaling approximately 361 inches, plus 12 pictures.

The role of George Pattullo's article in arousing public interest in York and consequently the interest of newspapers was crucial. Had the Saturday Evening Post article not appeared, York's arrival in New York probably would have gone unnoticed. Few people read the article with as much interest as Tennesseans, particularly one group of more than a hundred Tennesseans living in New York. They called themselves the Tennessee Society, and this organization, particularly the reception committee, must be given a large amount of credit for helping to make Alvin C. York the most popular hero of the war. Prior to his arrival they obtained for the newly promoted sergeant a five-day furlough and made extensive plans to show New York to the hero and the hero to New York. Showing him to New York meant showing him also to the New York press.

The Pattullo article appeared about midway in the two-month interval between the newspapers' first and subsequent mention of York. While Tennesseans fairly "burst their buttons" with pride, other readers were more skeptical. Pattullo himself had admitted that many war heroes were "newspaper made." Moreover, some of the witnesses to York's battle, who had given sworn statements about what happened, decided when they arrived in New York that they deserved some of the credit themselves.

Although some of the New York papers may have printed earlier stories about York's critics, the three newspapers examined did not

mention the hero's name again until May 22. Reporters had met the transport Sierra on its arrival the day before and had confronted General Duncan with the verdict of York's comrades that the Tennessean did not deserve all the credit for the feat. In a preview of the speech he would give at the Tennessee Society's banquet for York, the general pronounced the sergeant worthy of all the honors he might receive. All three newspapers published the general's statement May 22.

The same day Sergeant York arrived aboard the Ohioan, among more than 2700 soldiers and officers. Wearing his Congressional Medal of Honor pinned with other decorations on the breast of his uniform, the hero was beseiged by reporters, photographers, and an admiring public in addition to the reception committee of the Tennessee Society. From the moment he stepped ashore the sergeant was under the intense scrutiny of the New York reporters. If he did perform that incredible feat Pattullo had written about, how exactly did he manage it? What kind of man was he? What were his faults and his vices? Reporters wanted answers to these questions, and Sergeant York only heightened their interest by being silent.

The newspaper publicity about York's homecoming lasted through mid-June when he returned to Pall Mall from his wedding trip to Nashville. The news items focused mainly on eight major events: (1) General Duncan's arrival and confirmation of York's story, (2) York's arrival and reception in New York, (3) the Tennessee Society's banquet, (4) the Washington visit, (5) the subway ride in New York, (6) York's arrival in Tennessee, (7) his wedding, (8) the wedding trip to Nashville.

I. THE NEW YORK TIMES

The Times was more restrained in its treatment of York than either the Tribune or the Herald, not only in story length and prominence of display but in tone as well. The editors did not attempt to print every word of praise spoken about the hero during his stay in the city or to make up any of their own. The stories show no evidence that reporters borrowed substantially from George Pattullo's article, although questioning in interviews seemed to follow elements dealt with by Pattullo.

The May 22 story on the arrival of the Sierra featured Duncan's statement on York in the first four of ten paragraphs and bore this one-column headline: "Calls Sergt. York/ 'Bravest of Men'// Gen. Duncan Says Exploit of/ Tennessee Soldier Deserved/ Congress Medal// Answer to His Critics// Captain Roger Williams Brings/ Back French Countess as Bride/ on Transport Sierra." The item reiterates Duncan's assessment of York's feat as reported by Chase, that it was "one of the outstanding individual feats of the war" and his assertion that the entire matter had been "thoroughly investigated."[1]

A 14-inch story, the Times' longest on York, appeared May 23, the day after his arrival on the Ohioan. The item carried this headline: "Give Great Ovation/ To Sergeant York// Mountaineer Who Killed 25 Ger-/ mans 'Plumb Scared to Death'/ by Warmth of Welcome// Was Not an 'Objector'// Proud Tennesseans Obtain Fur-/lough for Hero and Plan Pro-/ gram of Entertainment." The reporter found York to be an unusual

---

[1]The New York Times, May 23, 1919, p. 15.

character, not only in looks but in manner. Identifying him as a "Tennessee woodsman" and "Congressional Medal of Honor winner" who had received the "personal commendation of General Pershing" for his feat, the reporter described the hero as a "big, red-haired, freckle-faced, blue-eyed Tennessean" who was "'plumb scared . . . to death'" by the cheering crowds. As presented in the Times, York was hardly a poised hero. He said to have blushed and tried in vain to "duck away" from the throng of people at the dock. The Times reports York "admitted" to having been the champion wild turkey shooter in his county and "denied" he was a conscientious objector when drafted.

Reporters were apparently persistent enough to get from the reticent hero ("Only by persistent questioning could he be induced to talk.") an explanation of the conscientious objector matter. "'When they took me to Camp Upton,'" York is quoted, "'and told me I was going to fight this man Kaiser, it didn't mean anything to me at all.'" York was told one day at headquarters his pastor at Pall Mall had written a letter requesting his release because he was a conscientious objector.

> "I was asked if I objected to fighting. I answered 'No, that's what I'm here for. But I wish you would tell me what this war is about.' Lieut. Col. Buxton and Capt. Garner talked to me and told me the things the Germans had done to other nations and to us. When they finished I told them I couldn't see how anybody who wanted peace in the world could do anything but fight."[2]

The camp name given is incorrect. York was at Camp Gordon. And an unfamiliar character, Captain Garner, has been introduced. Captain

---

[2]Ibid.

Danforth, the Bible expert always credited with having convinced York of his duty through scriptural quotations is not mentioned at all. If the reporter has quoted the essence of York's explanation correctly, the hero's wording may have saved him from telling a blatant lie. As quoted, he did not deny having personally requested exemption from the draft to his local and district boards.

Other elements which the Times chose to include in the York arrival story were his prudent response to being informed about his critics ("'Sure 'nough? Well, those men whose names you mentioned all made affadavits with other soldiers to Lieut. Col. Buxton that I had done all the things claimed.'"); his reported plans to "enter the ministry"; his claim to divine assistance in the Argonne; his expressed dissatisfaction with having "such a fuss" made over him; and his desire to go home and see his "girl."

York reportedly was praised by the officers and soldiers who accompanied him home and who observed that he never once had seemed to regard his feat as important. But inserted near the end of the item is this statement: "Several officers expressed regret that other members of Sergeant York's patrol which had surprised the Germans at Hill 223 in the Argonne Forest, had not won recognition."

The Times presents a hero who is uncomfortable and slightly embarrassed by the attention given him. He is a man whose background and temperament have apparently not prepared him for the limelight. Although in at least two instances the reporter attempted to reproduce his mountain dialect, there is no attempt to ridicule York, to discredit him, or to elevate him unduly.

On May 24 the Times ran on page 12 a poem by Richard Butler Glaenzer titled "A Ballad of Redhead's Day." The poem tells the version of the battle presented by Pattullo and contains about all the romanticism to be found in the Times' treatment of the hero. Following are fragments from four of the six stanzas.

> Alvin C. York of Tennessee
> Stayed cool to the end though his hair was red,
> Stayed mountain cool. . . .
>
> And, spotting the nest of the spitting guns,
> Potted some twenty birds, and then
> Did with his pistol for eight more Huns
> Who thought they could crush a Yankee alive. . . .
>
> And back to his lines he drove the herd
> Gathering more on the way--Absurd!
>
> Absurd, but true--aye, gospel fact;
> For here was a man with a level head
> Who, scorning to fall for the help he lacked,
> Helped himself till he won instead.
> An elder was he in the Church of Christ
> Immortal at thirty; his faith sufficed.

The day the poem appeared Sergeant York was stolen away from the Tennessee Society by Rep. Cordell Hull, congressman from York's district of Tennessee. Hull took York to Washington to show him off to other high government officials. "Washington Hails/ Brave Sergeant York// Baker and Tumulty Greet War/ Hero and House of Represen-/tatives Cheers Him" was the one-column headline given the item May 25. The reporter shows overexuberance in the quotation he attributes to Marshal Foch in the lead:

> Sergeant Alvin C. York, Tennessee's mountaineer war hero, pronounced by Marshal Foch and publicly acclaimed as "the greatest of all" had a memorable day in the national capital. Fresh from his reception yesterday in New York, and escorted

> by Congressman Hull of his native State and by a delegation of admiring townsmen from Pall Mall, York visited the War Department . . . the White House . . . and later the Capitol.[3]

Pall Mall had apparently become so well known that there was no need to identify it as York's home "town." Whoever the "admiring townsmen" were, however, they were probably not from Pall Mall.

York's reticence is clearly drawn in this item. The reporter says he "modestly declined to recount his exploits and set off in a corner of Mr. Tumulty's office while Representative Hull did the talking."

In spite of his reported desired to "go home and see mother," York was apparently learning the hero's role rather well. His appearance in the visitor's gallery of the House of Representatives reportedly drew cheers from both members and visitors. "York acknowledged with a salute," the story said.

Some indication of the Tennessee Society's efforts to promote York may be found in the May 26 Times announcement under a one-column head beginning "Sergeant York is Feted" that York had been entertained by Tennessee Society member Malcolm Meacham. Meacham is quoted as saying, "'I would not be surprised if York would be the next Governor of Tennessee.'" York is identified in this page 10 item as the war's "biggest hero."

The last major story about York in the Times during this period of "homecoming" publicity was the eight-inch subway tour item used May 27. The hero had expressed one wish before his short visit to Washington.

---

[3]Ibid., May 25, 1919, p. 14.

He wanted to ride in the New York subway. While he was gone, the Tennessee Society arranged a tour for him in the private car of the transit system's president. Identified as the "taciturn Tennessee mountaineer, whose feat . . . has been hailed as the most daring deed accomplished during the war by an American," York proved to be a diplomat, expressing pleasure at his stay in New York. "'The folks back home . . . will never believe me when I tell them all I've seen here,'" he is quoted as saying. During the tour reporters tried once again to get a story from York on his battle experiences:

> "Was it (the subway) anything like the trenches?"
> "Not much," was his only answer. Then in characteristic fashion, when asked about the war he changed the subject.[4]

Two short items about York appeared Friday, May 30, on page 7. One concerned an offer to him of a second lieutenancy in the Reserve Corps. The other has a Knoxville dateline and illustrates the use of a common identifying phrase enclosed by quotation marks but not attributed to anyone.

> Sergeant Alvin C. York, called the "greatest hero of the world war," returned to Tennessee today and received an ovation when his train stopped in Knoxville on the way to Fort Oglethorpe, where he will be mustered out. "I want to go home to see my mother first of all," York told a committee which invited him to return here for a reception after he leaves the service.

Not only the sergeant but his family and friends in Pall Mall had become of interest to the New York press. In the Rotogravure Section June 1 the Times used a layout of four pictures: (1) an oval portrait

---

[4]Ibid., May 27, 1919, p. 7.

of York made at the dock, (2) a portrait of "Miss Grace Williams, the Tennessee Mountain Girl, Whom Sergeant York is Engaged to Marry," (3) a photograph of the York cabin in Pall Mall with his mother and seven of his 10 brothers and sisters standing in front of the gate, and (4) "The 'Possum Trot Meeting House and its Congregation, Near Pall Mall, Tennessee, of Which Sergeant York Is Singing Leader and Elder." Although there is a community named Possum Trot near Pall Mall, this is the only instance noted in which the church was called by that name.

The lines for York's picture contain a variation from the wording of previous identifying phrases, but again the quotation is attributed to no one.

> Sergt. Alvin C. York, Tall, Lanky, Red-Haired Tennessee Mountaineer, Called the "Supreme Hero of the World War," with a Record for a Single Day of Personally Killing 22 Germans, Capturing 132, and Destroying 38 Machine-Gun Nests, Thereby Winning the French War Cross with Palm, and the American Congressional Medal of Honor, Highest Decoration Given by the United States.
>
> To Sergeant York, Marshal Foch, Himself, When Bestowing Upon Him the Croix de Guerre, Said: "What You Did Was the Greatest Thing Accomplished by Any Soldier of Any of the Armies of Europe."[5]

The term "singlehanded" was never used in the Times in reference to York's feat.

On June 8 the Times printed two stories mentioning York. One was a three-inch item announcing his marriage to Grace Williams. The other was a history of the 82nd Division written by Lt. Col. George E. Roosevelt and Lt. Col. G. Edward Buxton Jr., a Providence newspaperman

---

[5]Ibid., June 1, 1919, Rotogravure Section, p. 5.

who had known York since he arrived at Camp Gordon. Paragraph 9 of 24 is subheaded "Sergeant York's Exploit." It illuminates the significance of the battle as no other account had done.

> The corps objective which the 328th Infantry reached on Oct. 8 was . . . [a] railroad which supplied the German troops opposing the 77th Division with food and ammunition. This strategic line was seized and held . . . by the 2nd Battalion, 328th Infantry. It was during this attack that Sergeant . . . York, with some assistance from seven men in his squad, fought and whipped a first-class German battalion, capturing and bringing into our lines 132 prisoners, including the German major and three other officers. This has been called the outstanding individual achievement of the war, and Sergeant York received the Congressional Medal of Honor and the personal thanks of the Commander-in-Chief. That night, Oct. 8, this battalion, clinging to the narrow-gauge railroad, could hear the vehicles of the German transports moving north out of the forest.[6]

According to the article, two division members won the Congressional Medal of Honor, but only York is named.

A story with a Nashville dateline appeared June 11 under this headline: "Nashville Honors York// Business Practically Suspended/ While War Hero is Entertained." The story, designated as "Special to the New York Times," describes the Nashville reception of the Yorks and their bridal party and is almost ludicrous in some of its phrasing.

> A trip was made through the shopping district, where the bridge purchased a modern equipment and the bridegroom was measured for a Colonel's uniform, the gift of the Governor's Staff. The bride rebelled at the intricacies of the beauty parlor.[7]

---

[6]Ibid., June 8, 1919, Section IV, p. 13.

[7]Ibid., June 11, 1919, p. 3.

Coverage dwindled to an occasional mention of the sergeant. On page 18 of the June 12 Times a story was headed "York Gives Up Honeymoon// Hero Things Gift Trip Would Be/ 'Call of World and the Devil.'" Carrying a Louisville dateline, the story is concerned with York's failure to show up on the first stop of a scheduled trip to Salt Lake City for a Rotary Club convention. A telegram from Pall Mall, the item reported, said York had decided, after a talk with his pastor, the trip would be "'merely a vainglorious call of the world and the devil' and that he could 'serve God best by staying at home.'"[8] Pastor R. C. Pile, who took over York's affairs once he got to Pall Mall, probably sent the telegram himself.

That story drew a revealing editorial from the Times entitled "Tired of Posing As a Hero."

> Sergeant Alvin C. York, . . . well advised by judicious friends or taught by his own good sense, has come to the conclusion that he has had enough of exhibiting himself to admiring throngs. So he has brought his wedding journey to a sudden termination. . . . Though several . . . cities that had planned receptions for the Sergeant and his bride are left disconsolate, the inhabitants . . . must know . . . that his determination was wise.
>
> There is nothing surprising in his course. The Sergeant earned the glory he received, even though one does feel that the whole story was not told when the amazing number of his captives was revealed. He was a real soldier and a real hero, but only human, after all, and too long standing on the hero's pedestal would have affected even a head as hard and level as his own.
>
> His pastor, it is said, told him that he should resist "the vainglorious call of the world and the devil." That is one way of putting the case--a bit old-fashioned, perhaps, but not the worse for that--and the tall mountaineer will be happier in the

---

[8] Ibid., June 12, 1919, p. 18.

> end . . . for not exposing himself to further scorchings by the limelight of publicity.[9]

That editorial ended the Times coverage of York's homecoming. Never in the Times columns was there the curiosity about York's personal habits and the blatant hero-worship exhibited by the Tribune and the Herald. The Times maintained an underlying skepticism to the end of York's "homecoming" publicity and might have ignored the man had it not been for the public commotion he stirred.

II. THE NEW YORK TRIBUNE

While it printed fewer items, the Tribune devoted more space to York, and its stories had a decidedly different flavor. The Tribune took longer to discover that the sergeant was newsworthy. As previously noted, the March 22 War Department release had not appeared. The six-inch item on the landing of the Sierra got the following headline: "Fog Delays Landing/ of Four Ships With/ American Troops// Maj. Gen. George B. Dun-/can, of 82nd Division Ar-/rives on the Sierra--Cunard/ Line Also Makes Port."[10] The other two newspapers had used York's name in the headline. Two paragraphs down in the story appears the subhead "Praise for Sergeant York," and the third paragraph says General Duncan denied reports that York's accomplishment had been exaggerated. The story says York got the Distinguished Service Cross and the Croix de Guerre but fails to mention the Congressional Medal of Honor.

---

[10]The New York Tribune, May 22, 1919, p. 19.

The Tribune may have been surprised by the public reception given York on his arrival May 22. But someone had clearly done his homework with the Saturday Evening Post in time to meet the deadline for the May 23 edition. The front page story of York's arrival had the following one-column headline: "'Elder' York,/ Captor of 132/ Germans, Lands// Tennessee Sergeant Who/ Killed 25 of Enemy Re-/turns With 89th Division/ on Steamboat Ohioan// Winner of Congressional/ Medal to Get $50,000/ Farm and $2,000 Bond." The 20-inch story was accompanied by a one-column picture of York taken at the dock.

The Tribune gave York a different treatment from the straight news character of the Times arrival story. The hero gets a full physical description in the first paragraph, the reporter pointing out his red hair, red neck, and white eyebrows as well as his impressive size. The second paragraph contradicts the Times by reporting that York was a "conscientious objector when he left home."

The reporter followed York not only to his hotel, the Waldorf-Astoria, where he describes the solicitous attentions paid the hero by the bellboys and the manager, but up to his room as well. Once in his room, the story says, York "looked for a nail" to hang his overseas cap on. Even the hero's washup for dinner is described, and members of the Tennessee Society are shown brushing his coat and measuring his feet for new shoes. The reporter must have had high hopes of getting a story from York on his battle in the Argonne. But the most York would do was show off his "little pistol," something he was never reluctant to bring out even in later years. It was a small automatic which the German

major, lying on the ground with the other prisoners, had emptied at him while York was preoccupied with the machine guns above. The reporter took the opportunity to make use of his research.

> He drew out a Mauser automatic pistol. It was wicked looking but only about half the size of the .45 Colt automatic, with which the sergeant had dropped a German lieutenant and seven men who came charging with fixed bayonets down a hill to where York squatted in the tangled grass of the Argonne.
>
> "Got the lieutenant right through the stomach," explained York. "He dropped, screaming. Then I shot the others. All of them screamed when they were hit. Like pigs. They were only about twenty yards away. I couldn't miss."

The last paragraph is almost a direct quotation from Pattullo's article--the same quotation that is believed to have been fabricated there. It is almost surely borrowed here to enliven what the reporter feared would be a story disappointing to readers.

York is reported to have told the group he had been offered 500 francs for the pistol.

> "Don't you part with it, son," said Mr. Kellogg [a member of the Tennessee Society]. "Money don't mean a thing to you. You're gonna have so much that you can light your pipe with it if that strikes your fancy."

On May 24 the Times had printed nothing about York except the poem. The Tribune printed a 26-inch story on page 6 about the banquet given in York's honor by the Tennessee Society. The one-column head told virtually the whole story: "Subway Ride/ Is York's Only/ Unfilled Wish// Admiral on Right, General/ On Left at Waldorf Ban-/quet, but Never a Blush/ From Tennessee Sergeant// Had Time of Life Here// Hears Self Called 'America's/ Greatest Hero' and Leaves/ for His Southland Home."[11]

---

[11] Ibid., May 24, 1919, p. 6.

The story is built around a point emphasized by Pattullo--that the hero was calm and poised in whatever situation he found himself. The first paragraph says the Tennessee "farmer-blacksmith" should have been "blushing, stammering, and bowing himself out of the limelight into which he was thrust last night." The reporter explained that York never before had seen even "the most modest banquet hall" but found himself guest of honor at the Waldorf.

> . . . the one-time conscientious objector, played true to form in doing the thing he was least expected to do, just as he did when he captured 132 Hun prisoners, killed twenty more and put thirty-five machine guns out of commission. He took the ballroom, his distinguished host and fellow guests, the applause and the luxuries of the Waldorf as details of a welcome that he could not escape.

General Duncan's speech as quoted by the Tribune is perhaps the most blatant glorification of hero printed by the New York papers. The general is said to have called York "the most distinguished soldier the world has ever produced."

The general told a story in the course of his speech. It was the same one told in Pattullo's article about the conversation between York and the German major. The Tribune reporter apparently did not hear it correctly, for the printed story says the conversation was between York and the British general who received the sergeant's prisoners. According to the Tribune's account of Duncan's speech, the British general asked if York were English. "No, American," the sergeant replied. "Good Lord!" the general exclaimed and took York's name and home address. Other accounts reported Duncan to have related the correct version of the story.

The credibility of the reporter is reduced significantly when he says in one paragraph, "The red-haired sergeant's first day in New York was like a chapter from the volume of fairy tales that was the chief item of his home library. . . ." At that time the York "library" probably included little more than the Bible.

The Tribune's six-inch story on the Washington visit identifies York as the "wholesale captor of Germans," "one of the war's greatest heroes," and the "red-haired vanquisher of the enemy." It said the sergeant also had proved to be "one of the most modest of all heroes."[12]

When the hero returned to New York, the Tribune devoted about 21 inches to his tour of the subway in a private car. A comment concluding the story indicates the attitude of the reporter toward the Tennessee Society and perhaps characterizes that group as well as anyone ever has:

> A flashlight photograph was taken at Atlantic Avenue station with, as usual, the heads of members of the Tennessee reception committee all but resting on the sergeant's shoulders, so that future generations may find Sergeant York a legendary creature with three heads.[13]

The portrait of York used with his arrival story reappeared June 1 in the Graphic Section. For the first time in its coverage of York the Tribune was guilty of understatement. York is called a "twice decorated doughboy" who was "officially credited with the most spectacular individual feat of the war."[14]

---

[12]Ibid., May 25, 1919, p. 8.

[13]Ibid., May 27, 1919, p. 8.

[14]Ibid., June 1, 1919, Graphic Section, p. 1.

June 1 in Part VII the Tribune ran a half-page story by Borden R. Sparkes with two three-column pictures--one of the York cabin with the hero's family in front and another of York's church, Pastor Pile, and a group. An eight-column head topped the story and the layout: "With Sergeant York As He Mops Up New York// Facing the Big Guns Here One/ Of His great Heroisms/ of Peace."

A sum-up of the sergeant's visit to New York with much comment by the writer, the story begins with the statement: "Sergeant York conquered New York with less effort and as few words as he employed in killing twenty-five Germans and capturing 132 others." After describing a scene at the Winter Garden theatre where the audience rose in a noisy tribute to York, Sparkes says:

> It was the same story all over New York. Wherever the big redhead appeared wearing the bronze Congressional medal of honor suspended from a blue ribbon beside his Croix de Guerre with palm people stopped their chasing either of dollars, amusement or love to demonstrate to this fellow countryman their respect and adulation.[15]

Always curious about the private man, the Tribune touched on a subject in this article that was not mentioned in the other papers. York is described as the 10,000th man of 9,999 who would have succumbed to the temptation of women. Apparently the Tennessee Society had offered to procure some female companionship for York, but the offer was rebuffed.

Sparkes referred to York as a "character who will occupy at least a page in all future school histories of the United States." But he

---

[15]Ibid., Section VII, p. 3.

chose to end his story in a manner reminiscent of Chase's World's Work article. York had been asked if he would be returning to New York. "'If my mother'll let me,'" he is quoted as replying. On June 15 the Tribune ran a final picture of York being greeted at home by his mother. The cutlines mention York's recent wedding to his "boyhood sweetheart."[16]

While the Times had shown little evidence of borrowing from the Pattullo article except in the poem, the Tribune borrowed not only elements of the story but the general tone as well. Apparently the Tribune chose to pick up where Pattullo left off in the developing saga of Sergeant York. Tribune stories carried no hint of skepticism but always the attitude of admiration. In almost every story the main purpose of the writer seems to be readability even at the expense of accuracy.

III. THE NEW YORK HERALD

The Tribune stories about York sounded almost like straight news compared to the Herald's treatment of the hero. The Herald showed more interest in York, devoted more space to him, and gave his stories a bigger "play" than did either of the other two papers. A reporter not only went with York to his hotel room but went home with him to Tennessee.

The five paragraphs printed May 22 on the landing of the Sierra are devoted solely to Duncan's statements about York and the Tennessee

---

[16]Ibid., June 15, 1919, Graphic Section, p. 2.

Society's reception plans. The item carried this one-column headline: "82nd Commander/ Confirms Story/ of York's Valor."[17]

The Herald had an unusual format. The front section of the paper, Part I, was devoted to financial and business news and minor news stories of general interest. "Front page" stories appeared on the first page of Part II, which carried large headlines like the usual front page. The May 23 story of York's arrival was on the Herald's "front page" with a three-column headline: "Sergeant York, Hero of Heroes,/ Longs for Tennessee and Mother// Simply and Quaintly He Tells/ Story of Most Amazing In-/dividual Feat of War// Southern Societies/ Welcome Him at Pier// Second Elder of Anti-War Church/ Wants to Be a Preacher and/ Lead in Sunday Schools." Accompanying the story is a two-column picture of York at the pier and a one-column picture of his mother.

The Herald's use of Mrs. Mary York's picture suggests that the editors were working with the Tennessee Society. Members had obtained a picture of York's mother and had it framed and waiting for him in his hotel room. No other newspaper examined used a picture of York's mother until many days later.

The arrival story is especially interesting because it contains a horrible misquotation that must have made enemies for the sergeant among those of his company who read it. After presenting the usual details about York's physical appearance and his accomplishment, the story says:

> Persons at the pier tried hard to draw from York his own story of the engagement without success for a more modest and

---

[17]The New York Herald, May 22, 1919, Part II, p. 6.

> diffident hero has never come into port. But later a reporter for the Herald was with a party to whom he told in straightforward fashion just what happened. And when he came to the part describing how a row of machine guns turned their efforts on the little patrol, he remarked simply: "There was not one of the boys but run."

What York probably said was "There was not one of the boys that run." But having heard incorrectly, the reporter elaborated on it: "And he recalled that one of the fleeing men, whom he had called back to help guard the prisoners remarked in astonishment, 'Here's the impossible.'"

The Herald adds still another twist to the ever confused matter of York's status as a conscientious objector. The arrival story says York could have claimed exemption for his church membership and support of his mother and three sisters but that he "answered the call of the draft like a patriot."

Some of the quotations attributed to York have a false ring as if they were fabricated, this one in particular:

> "Believe me the Jerries were pretty tough medicine. If the American troops hadn't been the best fighters in the world I don't know what would have happened. You know I always felt that one American was able to handle about ten Germans. That's why I wasn't skairt any during that scrap. . . ."

Although York may have said this, the idea expressed is very similar to one expressed by Pattullo when he relates how York shouted for the Germans to come down and surrender "precisely as though the surrender of a battalion to an individual soldier were the usual thing--and I really believe he regards it that way, provided the soldier be an American."[18]

---

[18]Pattullo, p. 73.

An apparent fabrication occurs with mention of the phone call to Pall Mall which the Tennessee Society arranged for York his first night in the city. In every other account the phone conversation is said to have taken place behind a closed door from which York emerged with no evidence of emotion, but the Herald says "the sergeant was overcome with emotion as he greeted her [his mother] after more than a year's separation."

On May 24 the Herald ran a 34-inch story on page 1 and following pages of Part II. It is so full of praise for the sergeant it sounds like a promotion for a political candidate. The one-column headline says: "War's Great Hero,/ Off to Washington/ Didn't See Subway// Sergeant York Called 'One of/ Most Distinguished Soldiers// Ever Produced'// Remarkable Tribute by General Duncan// Sees the City and Causes Unbounded/ Enthusiasm Wherever He Is/ Observed." Following is the lead paragraph:

> "I shall never forget ye," were the parting words of Sergeant Alvin C. York, called by General Foch "the war's greatest hero," as he left New York at midnight for Washington after the city had paid him an unprecedented honor.

The reception for York described in the Herald account is more exuberant than accounts in the Times and the Tribune indicated. At the stock exchange

> . . . the brokers suspended business for half an hour as they cheered themselves hoarse and extended to him the privilege of the floor. Thousands of persons in Broad and Wall streets recognized him in the committee's automobile and crowded around it cheering for him so that it was necessary for the policemen to clear a path for the car through to Broadway.

General Duncan's speech at the Tennessee Society's banquet for York is quoted at length. Some of his comments on York have the ring of a

carnival barker's spiel, "'Sergeant York is not only modest, he is absolutely unabashed, unafraid in any society of people, in the presence of any enemy. As you see him here tonight you would have seen him on the field of battle.'"

As quoted in this account, General Duncan took credit for York's having been awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. "'So I started the investigation the results of which was the award by the President of the Congressional Medal of Honor which I had the honor of placing around his neck before he left France.'"

Reinforcing a point made by Pattullo, the Herald describes in the same story a reception at which York displayed

> a savoir faire that amazed those who were prone to regard him as a rough mountaineer. He stood in a corner of a room in the Waldorf apartments greeting seriously the more than a hundred men and women who were presented to him with all the ceremony accompanying a reception for royalty.

On page 2 of Part I a two-column head announced May 25 "Sergeant Alvin C. York,/ Fighting Elder, Cheered/ In House At Washington." This item sounds more like a tribute to the hero than a news story. The lead reports:

> Sergeant Alvin C. York, the fighting elder of Tennessee, today saw Washington, but with no greater interest than Washington saw Sergeant York. As the personal guest of Representative Cordell Hull, of his own State, he called upon and shook hands with many notables and among them the big mountaineer, set down as the greatest hero of the war, was the most notable of all.

Later in the eight-inch item the reporter inserts this comment: "An ordinary person might have revised his notions of his own relative importance in the world but Sergeant York did not. He accepted his honors modestly and was obviously pleased."

On May 26 appeared a very short editorial praising York's patriotism and a 14-inch story about his fears of being A.W.O.L. if he did not get back to camp.

The final story of the sergeant in New York covered his subway ride and theatre visit. Apparently the reporter never tired of writing such sentences as these describing the audience reaction to York at a performance of "The Count of Monte Cristo": ". . . the house simply went wild and for several minutes stood and cheered itself horase in tribute to the man . . . His mere presence added hundreds of dollars to the collection being made for the Salvation Army."[19]

Still hungry for news of York, the Herald sent reporter R. F. McCabe with the hero to Tennessee. The 21-inch item that appeared May 31 has a Crossville dateline and this head: "Sergeant York Is a 'Real/ Happy Kid' As He Breathes/ Air From Tennessee Hills// Whole of His Native State Honors War's Greatest Hero As He/ Returns a Civilian to Mountains and Mother--/ Crowds Cheer Him Everywhere." The first paragraphs of this story give the flavor of the stories to come:

> Alvin C. York, simon pure American who performed what General Foch termed the greatest individual feat of the world war, returned to his mountain folk today.
>
> Until yesterday afternoon he was a sergeant. . . . Today he outranks even the allied commander-in-chief in the estimation of hundreds of thousands of fellow Tennesseans who have made his journey . . . one continuous ovation. . . .
>
> Throughout all the jubilation in his honor Sergeant York has never wavered from being the cool headed and modest soldier who endeared himself to all who came in contact with him in New York when the country's metropolis was honoring him. The

---

[19]The New York Herald, May 26, 1919, Part II, p. 5.

> reserve that he displayed in the North has, however, given way to a boyish glee. . . .[20]

The sergeant must have found his voice once he got back in Tennessee, for the Herald quotes a short speech in which he told the Crossville folks "'I am . . . just one of you raised in the country with no chance for learning. . . . I've met larger crowds than this, but always bear in mind that there's no place like home.'"

The story appearing June 2 has the following dateline, "Jamestown, Tenn. (by Courier to Crossville, Tenn. June 1)." It is the only story in the New York or Tennessee newspapers examined that sounds like a realistic account of the meeting of York and his mother, which reportedly took place on the road between Jamestown and Crossville. Pastor Pile and Mrs. York had driven nine miles beyond Jamestown to meet the hero. The story has this headline: "Spartan Silence/ Marks Reunion of York and Mother// Neighbors More Demonstrative/ in Welcoming Home War's Greatest Hero."[21] Since there was little to report about the meeting, McCabe indulged in much sentimental speculation about the emotions of the two.

Mrs. York is characterized in this account as a very determined and headstrong woman. Jamestown citizens had planned a reception for Sergeant York, but the Herald says Mrs. York "would have none of it." She reportedly said she had to get back to Pall Mall and her daughter Lucy who had "run a nail in her foot." She took "Alvin" with her.

---

[20]Ibid., May 31, 1919, Part II, p. 3.

[21]Ibid., June 2, 1919, Part II, p. 5.

Between June 2 and June 15 the Herald devoted 173 inches of story space plus 10 pictures to York and his family. Following is a list of the subject matter of the items and photographs: (1) York's Memorial Day speech at Pall Mall decoration services (June 3, Part II, p. 4); (2) his settling down again to life in Pall Mall (June 4, II, p. 6); (3) his refusal to appear in a vaudeville act plus the announcement of his wedding plans with a one-column photograph of Grace Williams (June 5, II, p. 6); (4) a four-column layout of pictures with two poses of York and his mother and one of Grace Williams alone (June 7, II, p. 3); (5) preparations for the wedding (June 7, II, p. 3); (6) the wedding (June 8, II, p. 1); (7) the new Mrs. York in Nashville (June 10, II, p. 7); (8) the Yorks' reception in Nashville with a two-column picture (June 11, II, p. 6); (9) a sum-up of York's homecoming and a description of his boyhood in Pall Mall plus five pictures, two of York and the others of his family and friends (June 15, IV, p. 3).

Although he was always able to turn out glowing phrases in praise of the hero, McCabe must have grown tired of writing about the Yorks, just as Herald readers must have grown tired of reading about them.

The attitude of the Herald and the Tribune toward York and the image they presented of him in contrast to the realistic attitude of the Times can perhaps best be characterized by this quotation from a Tribune story:

> Each of the half dozen individuals who crowded after him, anxious to come in contact with the rough cloth of his uniform, was thinking that there was a man whose life was climaxed like a red and yellow covered five-cent novel, a Diamond Dick

in the flesh. A dead shot whose unerring aim with rifle and pistol was a wishing ring.[22]

[22]The New York Tribune, June 1, 1919, Part VII, p. 3.

CHAPTER IV

THE TENNESSEE PRESS

A crucial factor in any description of the York publicity in leading Tennessee newspapers is that of state pride. The six Tennessee newspapers examined for this study displayed that pride in characteristic ways and in degrees ranging from the relatively heavy coverage given York by the Knoxville and Nashville papers to the polite but scant attention paid him by the Commercial Appeal, Memphis.

As indicated in Table I, coverage of York from March 22 to June 15, 1919, in six Tennessee daily newspapers ranged from a high of 653 column inches for the Knoxville Sentinel to a low of 119 column inches and 10 items for the Commercial Appeal. The Nashville Banner was second highest in column inches but printed a total of 62 items, 20 more than the Sentinel. Fentress County circulation and the amount of time York spent in the respective cities seem to have been determining factors in the amount of space given York. Although circulation figures are not known, railroad connections were best between Knoxville and the Fentress area allowing easier circulation for Knoxville papers. The Nashville and Chattanooga papers probably would have been less widely circulated, and the Commercial Appeal on a daily basis would have been a rarity. York spent more time in Nashville than in either Knoxville or Chattanooga, a fact which could account for the heavy coverage given him by the Nashville Banner.

TABLE I

ITEM COUNT AND COLUMN-INCH MEASUREMENT TOTALS OF ITEMS ABOUT YORK APPEARING IN TENNESSEE PRESS MARCH 22-JUNE 15, 1919*

Newspaper	Items	Column Inches
Knoxville Sentinel	42	653
Nashville Banner	62	639
Knoxville Journal and Tribune	34	576
Chattanooga Times	35	419
Nashville Tennessean	39	350
Commercial Appeal, Memphis	10	119

The Nashville Banner issues for May 28, 29, and 30 were not available.

Measurements of column inches were made from the projected microfilm image and involve the approximation of rounded fractions and varying typography.

Pictures were not counted as items.

Aspects of the story that had not appeared in the New York papers emerge in the state publicity. The New York publicity added immeasurably to York's stature in his own state. Especially in the four largest cities, many Tennesseeans were sensitive about how they measured up in suavity to New Yorkers. When the sophisticated New York press had shown outright admiration for a mere backwoodsman, an "unsophisticated country boy," as one Knoxville paper put it, Tennesseans were delighted. A new promoter for the hero emerged in the person of Governor A. H. Roberts, a man with roots in the Upper Cumberland region who attached himself to York via the press as soon as the hero's name became newsworthy. The Tennessee newspapers magnified the interest of the New York papers in the persons close to York and in his religion. As the hero attempted to reestablish himself in civilian life, the Tennessee publicity reflected the whirlpool of confusion in which York found himself. The image of the hero remained unchanged throughout this period. He was ever the restrained and aloof heroic figure, and little is added to the information about the man himself in the Tennessee publicity. York is presented in the press with a vagueness as if the inner man were cloaked and guarded from public view.

The Tennessee press centered its publicity on essentially the same events as the New York papers did. The New York and Washington stories were prominently displayed in Tennessee newspapers, but the bulk of the publicity came when the hero, returning to Tennessee, visited three of the major cities in the state.

I. THE PREARRIVAL PUBLICITY

Four of the six newspapers examined had prearrival publicity--that is, publicity which preceded items announcing that the hero's ship had landed. The Knoxville Journal and Tribune, the Chattanooga Times, and the Commercial Appeal, Memphis, all used the March 22, 1919, Congressional Medal of Honor story. The Times used it on page 3, the Journal and Tribune used it on page 10, and the Commercial Appeal gave the story a nine-line, one-column head on page 7. The Medal of Honor story was not found in the Nashville Banner, the Nashville Tennessean, and the Knoxville Sentinel, although the latter did run a March 22 story of a Morristown soldier's receiving the Medal of Honor.

There was no word about York again until April 25, when the Banner ran a story about the Pattullo article published in the April 26 issue of the Saturday Evening Post. Much of the Pattullo article is quoted, but there is no mention of York having been decorated for his feat. The 22-inch item along with a two-column print of the Chase portrait appeared on page 21 as the first of the Banner's numerous prearrival stories, many of which were run on page 1. The Banner was the first of the newspapers examined to send a correspondent to Pall Mall to find and photograph York's family. Robert Fields' story of his excursion into the mountains of Fentress County in search of the hero's kin was run on page 1 May 8. Two of the page 10 photographs--one of the hero's mother alone and one of her with her children in front of her cabin--were widely used by other newspapers. The story, which describes the remoteness of Pall Mall and the hardships faced by York's mother in rearing her 11 children, was

the first front page story about the hero or his family found in any newspaper. It is also the first interview with York's mother. The Banner quickly took up the crusade begun by the state Rotary Clubs to raise money to purchase a farm for the still-absent hero. Between May 11 and May 19 the Banner ran a series of items on the fund-raising efforts. Five of these seven items appeared on page 1. On May 16 a seven-column streamer topped page 1, announcing "Saturday is Dollar Day For Alvin York Farm Fund." Eager to have the hero home, the Banner was one of many newspapers to print on May 19 the false information that York was about to land on the East coast. Attributed to the Associated Press, the page 1 item announced that "the Tennessee mountaineer who covered himself with glory in the Argonne" was aboard the Martha Washington. A five-inch item on the same page introduced the Rev. Rosier C. Pile to Banner readers. He had written to inform the Banner of Pall Mall residents' plans to welcome the hero home.

On April 28 the Knoxville Journal and Tribune broke its month-long silence by running a print of the Chase portrait and a rewrite of the Chase article including the quotation about the "mommer's boy" (page 5). There was no mention of the Pattullo article. On the same day the Chattanooga Times found its voice for the hero in an editorial titled "Corpl. York, Real Hero." The state pride is evident in this quotation:

> If there was ever any doubt that Alvin C. York accomplished the most remarkable individual feat of the war, it is removed by George Pattullo in a fascinating recital in last week's issue of the Saturday Evening Post of the Tennessean's big day--July 8 [sic], 1918--when he killed 20 Germans and captured 132, including a major. It sounds unbelievable and despite official verification and the showering of honors on the valiant

> mountaineer many must have concluded that the feat was not so outstanding as it has been made to appear, that it was really impossible for one man to capture over a hundred armed Germans. But after reading Pattullo's story there is the satisfying conviction that Tennessee produced a war hero whose deed will ring down the ages, for the Post writer proves beyond doubt that Corpl. York of Fentress County . . . did what enthusiastic and admiring fellow soldiers had accredited to him.[1]

One prearrival story with a Washington dateline appeared in the Commercial Appeal. Written by R. M. Gates, the item is in error about both the arrival date and the ship which York was aboard. The one-column headline on page 35 announced: "Sergeant York Be/ Home about May 19// War's Greatest Hero Board/ the Martha Washington// Hull Proud of Boy// East Tennessee Congressman Gets/ Furlough for Mountaineer and/ Will Entertain Him in Washington." The style of the lead conveys the sense of excitement felt by Tennesseans at York's homecoming:

> He is coming home. Tennessee's world-famed and universally proclaimed war hero, Sergt. Alvin C. York of the 328th Infantry, Eighty Third Division, is aboard the Martha Washington due to arrive on this side on or between May 19 and 21. The giant steamer, which was originally ordered to dock at New York, has been diverted to Newport News. Tennesseans residing in the east await eagerly the coming of Sergeant York, the Fentress County mountain boy who is officially credited with the paramount singlehanded achievement of the entire war, and will, if the opportunity is afforded, tender him a welcome commensurate with their fine pride in his unexampled record for heroic service in action.[2]

Gates adds near the end that the Tennesseans who would greet the hero in New York had no intention of "embarrassing" him with "society events." This item alone in the publicity examined implies that

---

[1]The Chattanooga Times, April 28, 1919, p. 4.

[2]The Commercial Appeal, Memphis, May 16, 1919, p. 35.

Tennesseans were uneasy about how the backwoodsman would behave in society's limelight.

Tennessee newspapers, other than the Banner, printed no special features on the hero or his family prior to his arrival home. The Knoxville Sentinel and the Nashville Tennessean apparently ran nothing at all about the hero before his troopship arrived in New York or was believed to have arrived.

II. STORIES OF THE ARRIVAL AND NEW YORK RECEPTION

At least two Tennessee newspapers printed fictitious arrival and reception stories about Sergeant York. The Chattanooga Times ran a premature arrival story May 21 on page 11. It carried this one-column headline: "Corpl. York Entertained/ By Tennessee Society." The item said York had been "royally welcomed," and it concluded with the most blatant inaccuracy of all, "At tonight's dinner he told brother Tennesseans his own story of the remarkable feat." In contrast with the Times, whose editors apparently attached little significance to any expected reception of the hero in New York, the Nashville Tennessean put the fictitious arrival story on the front page May 21 under this one-column headline: "Sergt. York Is/ Accorded Royal/ Welcome in New York// Tennessee Society Committee/ On Hand to Greet Him as/ He Disembarks." The lead paragraph declared York had received a welcome "such as no individual enlisted man returning from the European war has known." Although fictitious, the story was prophetic. It drew some scathing comments and another inaccurate story from the evening competitor the

same day. The Nashville Banner, which only two days before had printed an inaccurate item about York, put this headline on its May 21 front page: "York Due To Land/ At New York Today// Reports of 'Unprecedented/ Reception' For Hero Are/ Pure Fiction." Other newspapers were to use the word "unprecedented" to describe the reception the hero was given in New York. Since York did not in fact arrive until May 22, the Banner's story was also inaccurate. These premature stories indicate that the New York reception was not as entirely spontaneous as some press reports led readers to believe. The Tennessee Society had planned it to the last detail.

Coverage of the real arrival and reception appeared in most of the Tennessee newspapers on May 23 and varied in quantity and prominence. For the Knoxville Sentinel, May 23 marked the first mention of York's name. Placing the arrival story on page 3, the Sentinel identified York in the one-column headline as "Tennessean and Greatest War Hero." With it appeared an item concerning Pastor Pile's telegraphed warning to York about the evils of city life. The Sentinel, slow to pick up the story, began to run multiple items on York almost daily. On May 24 York took the lead position on the front page where three other York items also appeared. A six-column headline announced that the hero had received a hearty welcome in Washington. As background material the Sentinel ran an item which quoted Pattullo extensively and bore this head: "Here's Tale of York's Exploit;/ Even Stranger Than Fiction." Other front page items concerned the York farm fund and an invitation for the hero to visit Knoxville. Pages 2 and 8 also carried York items.

The actual arrival story proved to be the Tennessean's first accurate item concerning the hero. The May 23 page 1 story emphasized York's statement about being divinely assisted in the fight and added one bit of information not revealed in the other accounts--that the hero had locked himself in a stateroom when the ship reached port because he was "scared speechless." The subsequent stories from Washington and New York consistently made the front page in the Tennessean although not in the lead position.

Considering the extent of the Nashville Banner's coverage of York previously and the attack on the Tennessean for fabricating a news story, it is inconsistent that the Banner carried no story of York's arrival in the May 23 issue. On May 22 the Banner had used on page 1 the story of Pastor Pile's telegram. On May 24 the Banner had a two-column picture of York at the dock centering the top half of page 1. The caption read, "Tennessee's Prize Doughboy," but the story did not appear until page 2 and was the banquet story run by the New York Herald. A second banquet story, attributed to AP, appeared on page 4. Some of the pictures used by the Banner were not seen in any other newspapers. The May 24 issue carried two three-column pictures on page 2. One was the often-used picture of York with the Tennessee Society. The other was of York surrounded by reporters and cameramen at the dock. The cutlines said, "When Sergt. Alvin C. York, company G, 328th infantry, 82nd division, arrived at Hoboken, N. J., on the Ohioan, he became the most sought after person in America. His brief stay in New York was a continuous round of tributes to him." On May 25 the Banner put on page 12 its story of

York's having been received in Washington. The following day the hero was back on page 1 with the subway tour story. York was not given the Banner's lead story at any time during the weeks covered in this study, but his picture more than once centered the top half of page 1.

Not as widely circulated in the hero's home county, the Chattanooga Times and the Commercial Appeal, Memphis, appeared less interested than the Knoxville and Nashville papers in York's New York and Washington activities. The Times used the May 23 reception story and the May 24 banquet story on the front page. Subsequent stories from the East gradually moved toward the back of the paper. The May 23 arrival story in the Commercial Appeal appeared on page 5. It was the same story that appeared in the New York Herald. On May 25, however, the story of the Washington visit with pictures of York and the Tennessee Society appeared on page 1. No further stories from the East were found in the Commercial Appeal.

III. STORIES OF THE HERO IN TENNESSEE

Tennesseans wanted to see Alvin York in the flesh. All the stories coming from the East had whetted the curiosity not only of the ordinary citizen but of the press as well. Tennesseans wanted to give their hero a reception that would equal the one he had received in New York.

The Knoxville Journal and Tribune ran a page 7 story May 28 announcing the hero would be coming to Knoxville soon. He had reportedly "accepted an invitation." This item marked the first promise of personal contact between Sergeant York and Knoxvillians. A similar item appearing

May 29 on page 10 announced that the hero would pass through Knoxville on his way home but that possibly he would stop for long. By May 30 Knoxvillians had had a brief glimpse of the hero when his train stopped the day before in the early morning. The Journal and Tribune story was written by Jack Williamson, a reporter eager to give his own impressions of the famous hero. Williamson said of York:

> Sergeant York is not the simple mountaineer that the press of the country has painted him. He is a big overgrown specimen of manhood with a rather red complexion and decidedly red hair. His hands and face are freckled just enough to add attraction to his personality and make it superfluous to ask the nationality of his ancestors. He possesses a certain amount of modesty but also a coolness that cannot be shaken by the admiring throngs or by any foolish questions. Last but not least he possesses a shrewdness that will not allow him to be led into any discussion of his future plans. He shrewdly evades any questions pertaining to the girl back in Pall Mall or the exploit that won him fame.

In early June the Journal and Tribune sent a reporter and artist team to Pall Mall to cover the welcoming activities and the wedding there. Charles R. Forbes, the reporter, cast an unjaundiced eye not only on the hero but on his pastor and adviser, Rosier C. Pile. Nowhere else was it ever even hinted that all was not well in the much publicized association between the hero and his pastor. Said Forbes:

> Rev. Roscoe [sic] C. Pile was not so much in the limelight as usual. . . . This was remarked by the crowd as indicating a split between the hero and the leader of the Church of Christ in Christian Union. While there is no evidence to support this contention, those close to Pastor Pile declared that the parson has argued very strenuously against Sergeant York accepting theatrical engagements. When questioned about the matter all Pastor Pile would say was "Alvan [sic] seems to have a mind of his own."

That story appeared on the front page of the June 8 issue along with several other York items, including a two-column by seven-inch box

advertising "The Real Story of Sergeant Alvin C. York, 'The Greatest Hero of the War'" coming in a future issue. The ad continued:

> Realizing that a great deal has been published about Sergt. York, the Tennessee mountaineer who in a single engagement killed 25 Germans and captured 132 was inaccurate or colored. The Journal and Tribune sent two of its staff men to the Fentress County home of the hero to prepare a story which will tell the exact truth about what manner of man York really is--his church life, his family life, his personality--also something about his bride.

The ad concluded, "Everyone wants to know the truth about York." The story, written by Forbes with drawings by E. E. Burtt, appeared June 15 and covered two and a half pages beginning on the front of the Second News and Editorial Section. In the article Forbes traces the passage and development of the York story through the columns of the Journal and Tribune beginning with a reprint of the March 22 Congressional Medal story. He said the paper's editorial staff took little note of that story because others in the Knoxville area had received the same honor. There was a stir of interest, he noted, when the state legislature adopted a resolution to make Corporal York a colonel. (No news item on this resolution was found in any newspaper.) Forbes' assessment of the Pattullo story of April 26 was that the article "so far as the American public at large was concerned uncovered the one big hero of the world war and he selected as his material Alvin C. York." Forbes describes the newspapers' response:

> Immediately the newspapers of the country perked up. Here was a human interest story, the first big story of its kind since Yankee troops began to mix it with the Kaiser's hosts. Everybody wanted to know what kind of a man this was, where he came from and how he got there. . . .

Although Forbes staunchly upholds York's authenticity as a hero and denies that he was a conscientious objector, he suggests that this hero was as vulnerable as other men, especially where money was concerned. At the wedding Governor Roberts, aided by the sheriff, had barred photographers. Forbes concluded from this action that York might sell himself to the movies. "When the hero does sell out, if he does, he's going to sell all he's got in the way of picture rights." In Forbes' estimate York was just being shrewd in his silence and would drive a hard bargain to get "what's coming to him." Forbes drew a hero made weary by the clamor around him:

> York is close-mouthed. He is a little different when you see him at Pall Mall than in the large cities. Back home he gives the impression that strangers are people to be wary of. Any statement he makes is guarded. . . . He appears to have too many advisers and most of them have irons in the fire. It is self evident that anybody who can make capital, political or otherwise out of Sergeant York's war record is going to do so.

What had been mere hints at Pastor Pile's unworthiness in the June 8 story takes on the flavor of an outright attack as Forbes describes him this way: "The pastor is a farmer. He raises everything anybody else does and a little on the side. . . ." The reporter said a Presbyterian had compared Pile's religious sect to Holy Rollers. Said Forbes, "I think I know why Rosier C. Pile is pastor--he owns a cornet." Forbes drew the following conclusions about the hero's situation in mid-June. "From the news standpoint he's run his course. We make and unmake heroes in this country pretty fast. Note Hobson and Dewey. The danger to York lies in the fact he may not be able to discriminate between a demogogue and a good business man."

Knoxville's evening paper, the Sentinel, responded enthusiastically to indications that Sergeant York might come to Knoxville by giving the May 28 announcement a three-column head on page one. The following day the hero again appeared on page 1. His train had indeed passed through Knoxville and had stopped briefly. Another hero, a Commander Neal of the U.S. Navy and recipient of the Distinguished Service Cross, arrived on the same train. One headline topped two separate stories about the heroes. Although Neal's name was mentioned before York's in the headline, the story about Neal is largely concerned with his reactions to and assessment of Sergeant York. The three-column decks over York's story announced the hero's prophecy, "York Looks For More/ Fighting in Europe// Hero of the Argonne Is Given/ Ovation Here at Early Morning Hour." The reporter's characterization of York has a new twist. "York, feted and petted as he has been, is unspoiled. He is more like a father who is going through some set antic to please his children than like a hero accepting the acclaim of his fellow citizens. There is a twinkle in his eye. . . ." Pattullo's influence shows through as the reporter describes York's hair as a "flaming torch" in the dawn. The hero is said to have "modestly declined" to recount his exploits abroad. "The Tennessean can't see the heroism very clearly; it is obscured by duty," the reporter concluded. It was in this story that York verified Pattullo's account of his feat in the Saturday Evening Post.

The Sentinel was the only Tennessee newspaper to suggest that the sergeant was not eager to resume his life in the hills. A June 3 page 17 story carried this two-column headline: "Sergt. Alvin C. York/ Not to

'Stick Around'/ His Pall Mall Home." York had reportedly told the writer he would not stay in his native hills but planned to look for opportunities elsewhere. The image of York presented in this story is inconsistent with the picture of the homeloving hero that appeared in other accounts. A related story appeared on the June 4 front page discussing the offers York had received to go on the stage and quoting Pastor Pile as saying York would be turned out of the church if he accepted any of the offers. The story indicates York had regrets about not accepting an offer of $10,000 for an autobiographical newspaper story. The hero had reportedly forgotten which newspaper made the offer.

The Chattanooga Times first announced to its readers on May 27 that Sergeant York might visit that city. Four separate York items appeared on page 5, a favored place for items about the hero whose name could not be found on the Times front page during this period. The May 29 issue carried on page 5 an item about a scheduled stop of York's train in Chattanooga. On May 30 the Times' longest story of the hero filled two thirds of page 5. The story carried a three-column headline with one-column decks: "Chattanooga Opens Arms/ To Alvin York, of Argonne// Tennessee's Super-Hero/ Exhibits to Home/ Folks Stuff That/ Makes a Soldier// Unabashed and Unspoiled/ By Homage of a Nation// Guest of Rotarians Who Adopt Him/ Enjoys Frivolities at the Festival,/ Refuses $10,000 Offer to Go Into/ Vaudeville, Quickly Discharged From/ Army and En Route Home." The lead paragraph set the tone of adulation carried throughout the story:

> Chattanooga was thrilled yesterday in the presence of Sergt. Alvin C. York, of Pall Mall, Fentress County, the

> Tennessean who performed the greatest feat of the world war in the Argonne on Oct. 8, 1918. . . .
>
> York is a typical mountaineer, as it has been written many times. Red of hair, stockily built, but tall with it all, he is the most innocent looking fellow in the world. When he talks his voice is fine and subdued and does not carry an aggressive tone. It is York's religion that makes him a man to be feared in a fight. . . .

York left Chattanoogans, the reporter wrote, with this bit of wisdom: "'If you have God with you and trust and obey Him, you will always come out victorious.'" At one point the reporter, obviously impressed by York, spoke for all Tennesseans, "Nothing was too good for the big hulk of a man."

Chattanooga Rotarians were especially interested in having the hero accompany them on a trip to Utah for a special convention. Items appeared frequently in the Times about plans for such a trip, but it never came to pass, with York at least. The Times apparently sent no correspondents to Pall Mall.

The Commercial Appeal printed only one story indicating the hero might visit Memphis. In fact, the page 9 item on June 4 announced definitely that the hero would be coming to Memphis to attend the seventy-fifth anniversary celebration of the Y.M.C.A. No such trip took place so far as is known. The Commercial Appeal had no personal interview with York.

A front page story in the June 1 issue of the Nashville Banner announced that the hero would be coming to Nashville June 9 to receive a medal from the state of Tennessee. Robert G. Fields, who had gone to Pall Mall in early May for the first story and photographs of York's family, was sent back once York arrived there. Fields' story in the

June 2 issue ran under a two-column head on page 1. It was the story of York's appearance with Grace Williams at decoration day services, his speech, and the reactions of his neighbors. Three photos of York, Miss Williams, and Pastor Pile appeared on page 4.

Although they were with him from the time he arrived home, reporters for the Nashville Banner add little to readers' knowledge of the hero's character and personality. There was little evidence of the private man in the Banner's columns, although there seemed to be a constant "chatter" about his activities. There were no "in-depth" interviews or analyses of the hero even from Fields, who had followed the story as a reporter since late April. A great deal of attention was paid to the people who surrounded York. His mother was featured in a page 1 story on June 10. A woman's page story on the same day concerning the reception for the bridal couple at the governor's mansion dealt mainly with the bride and her shyness. A page 18 story on June 11 concerned the visit of York's mother to the Parthenon and her reactions there. The Banner, as well as the Tennessean had ample opportunity to explore the public personalities of both York and his family when the entire bridal party went to Nashville for a visit after the wedding. Most of the Banner's coverage of the Nashville visit has the character of straight news.

On June 13 a photograph of York at Jackson's tomb appeared on the Banner's page 14. The lines say:

> As the Tennessee mountain boy stood where lie the ashes of a North Carolina boy whose life belonged to Tennessee, two remarkable careers touched elbows. There is a striking similarity between the early environment of the two men; and as said yesterday by a man who has been a student of the life of Andrew Jackson, York in personal appearance is not unlike Jackson at his age.

No explanation of the similarities between the two early environments was given.

Even though the Tennessean was not as prolific with York publicity as the Banner, the former was both more revealing and more imaginative. The first personal contact a Tennessean reporter had with York resulted in a page 1 article June 2. Noteworthy about the item is that the writer attempted in several instances to reproduce York's accent by substituting "Ah" for "I." "Ah believed and the hand of God was with me," York was quoted. The story is of interest also because Grace Williams is described and quoted at length on the hero and their relationship. The reporter said Miss Williams fulfilled "what popular romance expects of a great hero's love." As quoted, she told the reporter that her parents had always been against her marrying York because they didn't think his conversion would "amount to anything." She reportedly told York that if he wanted to "go with" her, he would have to go to church. She had faith in him to do what he said he would, but because of her parents' objections she would not give him her answer concerning marriage before he left for the war. It is more apparent in this than in other accounts that York's fight in the Argonne was construed or perhaps accepted unconsciously as being a direct result of his conversion. A June 8 page 1 story contains, as well as significant information, such sentimental passages as "He tenderly clasped his arms about the slim waist of his heart's second conqueror--the Creator was his first." The item details the governor's announcement that there would be no picture-taking at the wedding ceremony.

> Earlier in the day Governor Roberts had conferred with friends of York, telling them moving pictures should not be allowed. He explained that if pictures of the world's greatest hero were flashed upon the nation's screens, Sergeant York's name would soon cease to be profitable to him should he desire to capitalize it. He pointed out that York should be protected.

The reporter adds that, as a result of the governor's ban on picture-taking, the representative of a New York newspaper, the Herald, took back the offer of $10,000 for the rights to a serial story of York's life.

On page 8 of the same issue this headline topped a story: "'What Shall It/ Profit a Man?'/ Says Sgt. York." The writer had drawn that quotation from York reportedly when he advised the hero to accept some of the money offers being made him. With no apparent intent to be detrimental, the reporter describes York as a "simple-minded, red-haired mountaineer" and comments on his press image: "In all the stories of the festivities given to laud the Hun killer, of the honors paid him to his face by rulers of the land, not one word has gone forth that he was unworthy of his fame, that he fell victim to vanity or pride or temptation." One quotation in particular contradicts the Sentinel's story that York did not plan to "stick around" Pall Mall. Said York, "'Every man should be allowed to lead his own life. Now I belong to the mountain country and these woods. They're all I ever knew before I went away. I know I'll be happier right here than any other place on earth.'"

Despite the picture-taking ban, page 1 of the June 9 Tennessean had a five-column layout of wedding pictures with the bride appearing three times and the bridegroom only once. June 10, the day after the

bridal party arrived in Nashville by train, the Tennessean ran five items ranging in position from the front page to the sports page. It was the bride, however, who made page 1 in a two-column story probably written originally for the women's page. The headline said, "Bride of Hero a Hard/ Job, Thinks Mrs. York." The June 12 issue carried a short item on page 7 announcing that state and county officials were trying to get the name of Fentress County changed to York.

IV. EDITORIALS

On May 24 the Knoxville Sentinel ran an editorial that compared York to Andrew Jackson and said Tennesseans would have to protect York from those who might try to discredit him, just as they had had to protect Andrew Jackson. Said the editorial:

> We question whether any merely individual hero was ever so feted and lionized as Sergeant (formerly Corporal) Alvin C. York, Tennessee's present date foremost rifle marksman, decorated by Marshal Foch with the title "The greatest hero of all!" And not without sufficient reason are these honors being showered upon him for his well-authenticated feat, perhaps the most phenomenal exploit recorded in the reliable annals of history and it beggars the realms of romance itself.

This editorial illustrates characteristics appearing in several of the editorials in state newspapers--tremendous state pride, a desire to assure readers of York's authenticity, and a tendency to exaggerate a bit, as in the quotation attributed to Marshal Foch. Again on June 3 the Sentinel ran an editorial one and a half columns long which called York "a wonderful fellow" and a "diamond in the rough." He is said to have "helped place Tennessee on the world map." York is called the "ideal hero upon which the resources and ingenuity of the fiction writer

has never developed the capacity to improve." The editorial quoted York's decoration day speech at Pall Mall and called him a "natural born orator."

The editorial in the April 28 issue of the Chattanooga Times mentioned previously in this chapter was perhaps the first one to appear in a Tennessee newspaper. The outstanding characteristic of this editorial is pride that Tennessee had produced a remarkable war hero, one whom a well-known writer had chosen as the subject of an important magazine story. On June 1 the Times carried on page 4 a reprint of an editorial from the Philadelphia Public Ledger. In this item York is compared to an Old Testament warrior. He is commended for his modesty and is held up as an example to justify America's participation in the war.

On June 14 the Nashville Banner devoted virtually the entire editorial page to Sergeant York and essays of opinion on York's speech and mannerisms in the light of the customs and ancestry of the mountain people.

"York Gives God the Glory" was the title of an editorial in the Tennessean run May 24. That title is misleading because the editorial is mainly a vehicle for an attack on a rival newspaper. After praising York for his virtues and modesty and telling how George Pattullo proclaimed him a hero to the entire country, the item says:

> The Tennessean joined the press of the state in commending the action of the Rotarians and has been cooperating with the Rotary plan of raising funds for the York farm fund. No one has found occasion to complain of our cooperation, except a decrepit old shrew, who would divert the Rotary Club's plan

> to exclusive personal, political and selfish purposes, and attempt to discredit those equally interested in the success of the Rotary plan by infamous falsehoods born of the shrew's diseased and decaying brain.

Apparently a rival newspaper, in all probability the Banner, had complained that the Tennessean had not given enough space to the hero and the fund-raising campaign.

Perhaps the most interesting editorial was run by the Commercial Appeal, the paper farthest removed from York and the one which printed less about him. The June 9 editorial, titled "Let Sergt. York Live His Own Life," criticized the excessive publicizing of York and the public clamor. It said that having humbly and calmly borne the showers of honors and attention, he should be allowed to plan his own future. "As a corporal York performed in the course of his duties an exploit that thrilled the world." The writer concludes that as a colonel he might have failed. Honorary offices, the writer says, were probably not welcomed by York, and he should not have been paraded before the public like a circus attraction. "After he has gone from the earth, posterity will look after his name and his deed," the item concluded.

V. THE YORK PROMOTERS

One of the first Tennesseans to associate himself with the hero was Governor A. H. Roberts. The Knoxville Sentinel's May 23 edition contained two page 3 stories about York. The less important one had a Nashville dateline and said that York's pastor had sent a telegram to New York warning the hero about the pitfalls of city life. The story describes York as an "unsophisticated country boy." In the other story

the governor is quoted as follows: "York is all right. I know him." On May 28 the Knoxville Journal and Tribune printed a story, also with a Nashville dateline, announcing that the hero "about whom New York has gone wild since his return from France" would visit Nashville. Governor Roberts is described as being personally acquainted with the hero.

Because he associated himself with the hero or was associated with him through his press comments, his invitation for York to visit Nashville, and his presence at the wedding ceremony, the governor was very much written about and interviewed. His speech at the June 7 wedding in Pall Mall was described on page 1 of the Journal and Tribune the following day by Charles R. Forbes, "The Governor, at home in his native hills, soon dropped into the vernacular and in an address which recited the deeds of Sergeant York he borrowed liberally from the story of a well-known magazine writer." The June 8 Tennessean and American, the Tennessean's Sunday edition, reported on page 1 that Governor Roberts had advised that York protect his financial future by barring motion picture photographers from the wedding. On page 1 of the June 9 issue the Tennessean printed an interview with Governor Roberts. The story got this headline: "Roberts Tells/ Story of York/ Wedding Trip// Young Fentress Hero Is To Be/ Guest of Governor During/ Stay." The governor told the interviewer he had not meant to bar still photographers from the ceremony. He said that he had stopped the photographers at York's request and that he had received a telegram from the Tennessee Society in New York thanking him for protecting York's financial interests.

While York and his bridal party visited Nashville as a guest of the governor, the Rotarians entertained the hero at a banquet where the

governor was principal speaker. Both Nashville newspapers quoted the governor's remarks, some of which were directed to the press and its treatment of the hero. In a June 11 page 2 story in the Banner, Governor Roberts was reported to have said newspapers had been very unkind to Sergeant York and his people in Pall Mall. He reportedly accused one Chicago newspaper of publishing "calumny" against the sergeant. The governor tried hard to present an unblemished hero:

> Gov. Roberts indignantly refuted the published stories that Alvin York, when drafted, had tried to evade service by claiming exemption on the ground that his mother was a widow and poor.
>
> "It is all true that she is a poor widow," said the speaker, "but her son never claimed exemption. He never shirked his duty and was never a slacker."

In the Tennessean's account of the banquet, printed June 11 on page 1, Governor Roberts is said to have defended the various sorts of gambling and the shooting matches of the mountains as a necessary part of a boy's training. He accused an unnamed Chicago newspaper of slandering York and said the hero had not been treated fairly in many newspapers.

Although not as impressive or politically powerful as Governor Roberts and not as important to the press, Pastor R. C. Pile was an avid promoter of Sergeant York. His motives for trying to influence York's worldly affairs are not known, but it is a fact that he was York's friend and adviser before the man became famous as well as after. His association with York put Pile in the public eye as soon as the Pattullo article appeared. The pastor then made newspapers in both Tennessee and New York with his telegraphed warning to the newly arrived hero about the

evils of city life. Apparently it was Pile who kept the Nashville papers informed of newsworthy events scheduled in Pall Mall for Sergeant York. As early as May 19 the Banner printed a page 1 story on plans that Pile had announced for the hero's reception in Pall Mall. Pastor Pile was inseparable from one of the most important elements of York's story--his religion. The public wanted to know how Pile, as head of a self-proclaimed pacifist church, reacted to the fact that his elder had killed more than 20 Germans in one battle. Pastor Pile's widely printed reply was that, although he had personally opposed York's going to war, the sergeant would not be put out of the church for having performed well in battle.[3] According to a June 2, page 9 story in the Knoxville Sentinel, Pile wrote a friend in Knoxville that he and York might come there to "lecture." At that time Sergeant York was in a quandary over which, if any, of the money offers to accept. Pile was dead set, according to published reports, against anything related to the theatre. The Knoxville Sentinel quoted him on page 1 of its June 4 issue as saying that York would be turned out of the church if he accepted theatrical offers. The only newspaper that printed anything unflattering about Pile was the Knoxville Journal and Tribune in the previously cited stories by Charles R. Forbes, whose suspicion of and dislike for Pile are obvious to the reader.

W. H. Buttram, attorney-general of the Ninth Judicial District of Tennessee, was among those professed acquaintances of the hero who

---

[3]The Chattanooga Times, June 3, 1919, p. 2.

either wrote articles for Tennessee newspapers or were interviewed on their acquaintanceship with York. What Buttram "revealed" about York was mostly what had already been printed. On May 31 the Journal and Tribune ran its first Buttram article on page 4. Said the article, "General Buttram is an intimate acquaintance of Sergeant Alvin C. York, the hero of the Argonne woods and the man who placed Pall Mall, Tenn., on the map. . . . He has read every line in the papers about him and states there is not a shadow of a doubt that he is not the most remarkable hero that the world war produced." Buttram, as quoted in the article, said York told the people back home before leaving that he would let them hear from him. Said Buttram, "York won't let it go to his head." The Knoxville Journal and Tribune may have reached the height of the ridiculous in a June 8 page 1 story with the following headline: "Early Life of Alvin C. York/ Intimate Knowledge Revealed/ by General Buttram// Much of His Prowess Ascribed/ To Blue Back Speller// Reclamation of This Historic/ Text Book Is Recommended/ To Governor Roberts." In this strange mixture of hero worship, politics, and unknown factors, Buttram credits York's greatness in battle to the influence of the Blue Back Speller and recommends to the governor by letter that the book be reinstated in state schools. The Knoxville Sentinel ran a page 9 story on June 2 quoting Buttram on the fact that York had taken his Bible into battle with him despite the ribbing of his comrades.

On May 27 the Chattanooga Times ran a story with a Cincinnati dateline which quoted a former employer of York. The story was an

interview with Earnest F. Porter of Monticello, Kentucky, who claimed to know York "personally." There is little information in the item that could not have been gleaned from published accounts. Porter said York was "the prototype of the imaginary character made famous in the war song, 'Long Boy.'"[4] On May 30, page 5, the Times ran interview with one of York's relatives, a cousin who lived in Chattanooga and remembered the hero as a boy.

A Major Rutledge Smith appeared in the Times and other newspapers in the state denying there was any record of York's having been a conscientious objector. The story was prefaced by this statement: "Maj. Rutledge Smith, executive director officer for Tennessee in the selective service, has looked up the record of Sergt. York, and he found nothing showing him as having made any claim against combatant services because of conscientious objections. Maj. Smith has written the article below in tribute to Sergt. York and his Tennessee mountains." The Nashville Tennessean and American used Major Smith's story Sunday, June 1, under a three-column headline on page 1: "Man Who Sent York Overseas/ Writes of War's Great Hero." The introduction to the story claims it is the "official version" of York's story. The article seems concerned mainly with Smith's description of York's homeland, the Upper Cumberland region, "where the pure Anglo-Saxon is uncontaminated." Much of the major's knowledge of York appears to be gleaned from newspapers. He reports he could find no record of York's ever having been a conscientious

---

[4]Ibid., May 27, 1919, p. 5.

objector. A final comment in the article is almost certainly a conclusion drawn from newspaper accounts: "He has subdued his passions and has a master control of himself that cannot be excelled."

On May 24 the Tennessean in a brief item on page 8 reported that a neighbor of York's from Forbus had been in Nashville and told how well York could shoot. The neighbor reported that in letters sent home York never said anything about "killing those Dutchmen."

A. R. Hogue, a Fentress County historian, who observed his 101st birthday in June, 1974, was a frequent contributor to the Nashville Banner. In a June 2 letter printed on page 4 Hogue contrasted York's hero's reception when "every car in Jamestown" had gone out on the road toward Crossville to meet him with his first leave from the army when he had had to walk much of the way home. Hogue had this comment about the newspaper accounts: "It is amusing to note the attitude taken by newspapers in regard to York. At first he was the Fentress County hero, later he was the Tennessee hero, still later the Atlanta papers insisted that he was a Southern hero, the papers of Boston and the North now speak of him as an American hero. It is now time that all should say that he is the world hero." No such progression in identifying phrases was observed in the newspapers examined.

CHAPTER V

YORK IN THE NEW YORK TIMES AFTER 1919

Although the ardor of the press cooled toward Alvin C. York as he earned a permanent place among renowned Americans, he was not forgotten by newspapers. Even the New York Times, which had staunchly resisted the hero worship indulged in by other newspapers, inserted occasional York items through the years until his death in 1964. Many of the items were small and buried on the back pages. But between 1920 and 1964 the Times printed 109 items about York, totaling approximately 685 column inches. A reader whose only source of information about York was the New York Times would have seen York's life as a peculiar mixture of triumphs and tragedies. Through the years the hero became a speaker, founder of a school, a war enthusiast, a financial failure, and a sick old man. But in all the publicity one fact never changed. He was the hero of the Argonne, singlehanded captor of 132 Germans. Even the Times acknowledged his unique feat in almost every item it printed.

I. YORK AGRICULTURAL INSTITUTE

In the decade after York's return from the war the Times publicity about him was largely concerned with his establishment of Alvin C. York Agricultural Institute, a school he hoped would help the people of Fentress County build a better way of life for themselves. Today it is the largest secondary school in Fentress County and the only public high

school in Tennessee supported by state funds. In the early 1920's it was only the hero's dream. Nine of the 22 items printed in that decade concern York's efforts to raise money for the school and to solve problems connected with its founding. Ultimately he raised some $15,000 through his lectures, the county and state together contributed $100,000, and the school was finally dedicated in 1927. In June, 1926, the Times printed a 29-inch feature which bore this headline: "War Hero's Dream/ Now Coming True// Sergeant York Is Building a School by Means of/ Which the Lives of Isolated and Ignorant Ten-/nessee Mountain People May Be Brightened." Writer William S. Howland said in the article that York was attempting to lift people out of "the rut of generations and teach them not the intricacies of higher knowledge but the practical things of life."[1]

York had disputes over the operation of the school with the county, the state, and his own corporation, according to the Times, and in 1928 he returned to lecturing in an effort to raise more money. Apparently he was determined to start all over again and build another school that more closely approached his dream. A January, 1927, item said:

> The State has appropriated $50,000 but has specified that the school be an "agricultural institute." Sergeant York himself has founded a private corporation, the York Industrial Institute for the purpose of developing a school of industrial arts.[2]

The state was victorious in the dispute as the school has remained Alvin C. York Agricultural Institute.

---

[1]The New York Times, June 6, 1926, IX, p. 6.

[2]Ibid., Jan. 26, 1927, p. 37.

The Times did not make clear the subject matter of York's money-raising lectures. Apparently the hero was still reluctant to talk much about his war experiences. He said at a lecture in Missouri he was "'trying to forget the war'" and described himself as having "'occupied one space in a fifty mile front. I saw so little it hardly seems worthwhile discussing it.'"[3]

The financial problems that were to plague York throughout his life began to be publicized in the Times as early as 1921 in a report that the hero was "working like a Trojan to save his fine farm for his wife and baby."[4] Attorney General William H. Buttram, York's old supporter, was quoted in the same item: "I hope the people of the United States will stand by Alvin York. . . . He mustn't leave that farm. Not that Alvin cares for wealth or anything like that but he has founded a school here for the mountain boys and girls which it is his aim to have cover his farm someday." At that time York had only the dream of such a school. He wrote to the Tennessee Society in New York informing them he could not pay the $12,000 still owed on the farm, a gift of the Rotary Clubs and the people of Tennessee. The society said it would try to raise the money.[5] Despite his money problems, the Times reported, York still would not commercialize his fame by posing for advertisement pictures[6] or by going on the stage or in motion pictures. He told a Kentucky

---

[3]Ibid., Jan. 19, 1927, p. 4.

[4]Ibid., July 21, 1921, p. 2.

[5]Ibid., Oct. 5, 1921, p. 16.

[6]Ibid., Jan. 6, 1922, p. 36.

audience when he lectured with William Jennings Bryan he "would rather be 'a pauper and homeless knowing that he was serving God and would have a home in heaven.'"[7] A senator from Tennessee even tried unsuccessfully to get a pension for York by introducing a bill to retire him with the rank of captain.[8] On June 1, 1922, the Times reported on page 10 that the hero at last had a clear title to his farm. The Tennessee Rotary Clubs had obtained the mortgage money for the 400 acres in a second fund-raising campaign.

On the tenth anniversary of the end of World War I York returned to New York to speak at Carnegie Hall. The Times story was printed November 10, 1928, on page 16. York's new role as founder of a school was featured in the one-column headline: "York, Hero of War/ Welcomed By City// Sergeant and Guard of Honor/ Received by Walker as 3,000/ Shout Greeting// Won Fame in the Argonne// Soldier Who Captured/ 132 Prisoners Now Conducts/ Farm School in Tennessee." The lead is reminiscent of the 1919 publicity.

> Ten years ago tomorrow the World War ended. Yesterday New York and its Mayor welcomed a mild mannered, red haired giant from the hills of Tennessee as the greatest hero of that conflict. Sergeant Alvin C. York received the city's plaudits yesterday for his feat on the morning of Oct. 8, 1918 when singlehanded, he captured 132 German prisoners, killed twenty-five with as many rifle shots and disabled thirty-two German machine guns.

A page 28 story the following day had this to say about his Armistice Day speech, "Sergeant York was warmly received and although the story

---

[7]Ibid., May 31, 1922, p. 7.

[8]Ibid., Aug. 6, 1921, p. 3.

of his remarkable wartime accomplishment has long been familiar, his audience displayed an enthusiastic interest in hearing something about his experiences from his own lips. . . ."

II. CHALLENGES TO THE LEGEND

It came to light near the end of the decade that not everyone believed York was the greatest hero of World War I. In the fall of 1929 he reenacted his feat at the Army War College in Washington.[9] This event drew an attack from some disgruntled members of his platoon. The Times published a 15-inch editorial titled "Sergeant York's Exploit" on October 7, 1929, page 24.

> While Sergeant Alvin C. York . . . was capturing thirty-two machine guns and taking 132 prisoners at the War College's military carnival in Washington last week, some members of the shattered platoon . . . were disputing his title to the whole credit for the exploit. When he came home in 1919, with the Second Battalion of the 328th Infantry, there were officers and men who contended that Corporal York did not defeat and capture the enemy "single-handed." The War Department was not responsible for the frequent use of the expression.

The widely published citation for the Congressional Medal of Honor is then quoted and a correction made according to York's own version of the incident.

> . . . York's own story does not show him to be charging a machine gun nest, but using his rifle with deadly effect from a half-sitting posture in the brush, and later with an automatic pistol bringing down most of the attacking party.
>
> It has been said "It was York's party" and "It was York's battle." He proved himself a strategist as well as a good soldier.

---

[9] Ibid., Sept. 22, 1929, p. 18.

The writer seemed interested in allaying doubts about York's reputation. He quotes Sergeant Parsons, who had sent the squad on its fateful mission, as saying that soldiers Early and Merithew were both out of the fight early in the action and that but for York no one would have survived. The item reports Merithew's grievance to be that "'York has been drummed up and down the country as a one-man army.'" The ex-corporal, who enlisted under the name of Cutting, said he thought Sergeant Early should have received a medal for getting the platoon into the woods without a casualty. The writer notes that Early had received the Distinguished Service Cross only a few days before.

The dominant theme of the 16 York items printed during the 1930's is that of war. World War I and the major heroes of that conflict were considered in retrospect. The American legion convention at Bostin in October 1930 honored 90 heroes of World War I. At the top of the list were the names of Sgt. Alvin C. York and Sgt. Samuel Woodfill, a man whom Pershing reportedly had called the outstanding soldier of the war. The writer, Oliver McKee Jr., said Woodfill's name would go down in history for an act similar to York's.[10] A one-column picture of York accompanied the item. There was a search as late as 1931 for unrecognized heroes of the war. A feature in March, 1931, began with, "Twelve years after the World War the men who fought it are still conducting a battle of words to decide who was its outstanding hero. Recently a new candidate was put forward."[11] The item named a previously unrecognized

---

[10]Ibid., Oct. 5, 1930, X, p. 5.

[11]Ibid., March 22, 1931, IX, p. 7.

combatant and described his deed but reserved a paragraph for York and Woodfill. York is described as the "nominee of the late Marshal Foch" and Woodfill as "the man most highly praised by General Pershing." Today Woodfill is virtually forgotten.

In 1935 there was still another challenge to York's authenticity as a hero. In the August 11 issue, page 15, the Times ran a story with this one-column headline: "Say Sergeant York/ Got Honor Wrongly// Connecticut Legionaires As-/sert Germans Were Captured// by Sergeant Early// Ask Action by Congress// New Haven Veteran is Still Ill of/ Wounds--'All This Is Old'/ Replies Tennessee Hero." In the story the Connecticut Legionaires, claiming the credit for Early, said he actually had turned the 132 prisoners over to York. York refused to comment, and the Times reiterated General Pershing's comment about York's being the "greatest civilian soldier." Two days later Lt. Col. C.E.B. Danforth Jr. spoke up for York. The August 13, 1935, story had this one-column headline on page 8: "Upholds Sergeant York// Former Commander Says Legion-/aires' Heroism Claim is Unfounded." Danforth issued a statement similar to one he made after the incident was investigated in 1918--that Early was out of the fight before the real fight started and that the credit was rightfully given to York. Danforth was "'satisfied that the vast majority of the 143 prisoners taken were captured by York who single-handed killed twenty-five or thirty Germans in the encounter.'" At last the issue was laid to rest in the Times.

If the challenges to his reputation damaged York's public image, it is not evident in the Times publicity. Later in the decade York was

drafted by the Prohibition Party as a candidate for vice president of the United States.[12] York declined the nomination, saying he was a Democrat and would not oppose his party.[13] He had spoken out against the American Legion in 1930, accusing it of disregarding the "law" at conventions, although the Associated Press story used by the Times did not make clear which law was being disregarded.[14]

Enjoying a high point in his popularity, York attended the New York World's Fair in 1939. The Times ran a 12-inch story the day he arrived. The one-column headline said: "York Spies on Fair/ Early For Tribute// Tennessee War Hero to Be/ Honored July 22, Enjoys/ It First Incognito// 'Last of Long Hunters'// Famous Ex-Sergeant to Be/ Speaker at State Fete/ Praises Exposition."[15] A writer named Thomas Skeyhill published a book on York titled Sergeant York; Last of the Long Hunters.[16] Although the book is not mentioned in the Times item, it is probably the source of the term used in the headline and the source of Sergeant York's material for the speech he delivered nine days later on Tennessee Day at the fair. On July 23 the Times reported that York "stole the show" with his address on the Long Hunters from whom he claimed descendence. Said the reporter, "Speaking in humorous fashion and not scorning to employ

---

[12]Ibid., May 8, 1936, p. 2.

[13]Ibid., June 27, 1936, p. 7.

[14]Ibid., May 31, 1930, p. 19.

[15]Ibid., July 13, 1939, p. 15.

[16]Thomas John Skeyhill, Sergeant York; Last of the Long Hunters (Chicago: The John Winston Company, n.d.).

homely mountain phrases, Sergeant York soared to almost evangelical eloquence. . . ."[17]

III. FILM FAME AND WAR FEVER

York displayed a dramatic reversal of opinion over a three-year period regarding the involvement of the United States in foreign wars. In 1934 the Times quoted him in an Armistice Day story as saying he believed Europeans should "fight their own wars" and that the United States should fight a defensive war only.[18] By 1937 he was saying that the United States should attack Japan and "get it over with." York had reportedly told an Associated Press reporter he believed Japan would attack the United States when it had finished with China.[19] In another Associated Press story printed a year later York was quoted on Hitler. Said the one-column headline: "Sergt. York Offers/ Plan to Stop Hitler/ 'Must Knock Him Off Block'/ Says Hero of 20 Years Ago."[20] The interviewer reported York to be at work as usual on his 395-acre farm building a silo.

During the 1940's the Times printed 33 items about York covering almost exclusively his comments and activities concerning World War II and the film made about his World War I exploits. The first item of the

---

[17]The New York Times, July 23, 1939, p. 26.

[18]Ibid., May 31, 1930, p. 19.

[19]Ibid., Nov. 12, 1937, p. 3.

[20]Ibid., Oct. 9, 1938, p. 41.

new decade reported that York had refused to sign a contract with producer Jesse Lasky for a film version of his life. York said he would want the part of his life since the war portrayed because he was proudest of that part.[21] By March 24, 1940, he had become technical adviser for a film that would premiere in the summer of 1941.[22] In the meantime he spoke out at every opportunity for United States intervention in World War II. In May, 1941, at the alumni banquet at York Agricultural Institute, York is quoted as saying that Adolf Hitler "'can, will, and must be beaten and all the medals pinned on the chests of so-called heroes cannot avert it.'"[23] He delivered later the same month the most noteworthy speech of his life at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington Cemetery. The Times one-column headline said: "Must Fight To Keep/ Liberty, Says York// Victory in 1918 Gave Us 'a/ Lease, Not a Deed to it,'/ Sergeant Declares// Hitler Perils Renewal// Assailing Isolationists, He Tells/ Senator 'Neville' Wheeler/ Bullets Pierce Umbrellas." The Times story ran 39 inches and included the entire text of the speech. He called for "all out" aid to England and mentioned a "famous Transatlantic aviator" who was apparently trying to keep America out of World War II.[24]

---

[21]Ibid., March 16, 1940, p. 9.

[22]Ibid., March 24, 1940, p. 30.

[23]Ibid., May 18, 1941, p. 33.

[24]Ibid., May 31, 1941, p. 6.

In July, 1941, the movie Sergeant York premiered in New York. A two-column picture of York with Gary Cooper, the star of the film, appeared July 2 on page 12. Said the accompanying story:

> Apparently as impervious to heat as to bullets, Sergeant Alvin C. York of Centris [sic] County, Tenn., World War hero No. 1 lustily called for convoying yesterday as reporters steamed through an interview with him in the compartment of the railroad car on which he arrived at Pennsylvania Station.
>
> The station was filled with cheering spectators, soldiers, color guards and bands as Sergeant York a large man, who singlehanded disabled thirty-two German machine guns, killing or capturing 157 of their defenders, strode from the train.

The night of July 2 York attended the premiere of his film. Movie critic Bosley Crowther called the motion picture a "simple and dignified biography" and "a strangely affecting account." He wrote "It is a little naive, perhaps, but so are the folks of which it tells." Crowther quotes York as having said at the reception following the premiere that he hoped the film would contribute to "'national unity in this hour of danger.'"[25]

Sergeant York "insisted" he was no war monger, according to a July 4, 1941, item on page 16. He was quoted as saying, "No one can possibly hate war as much as a soldier who has tried to catch his breath with the mud of trenches caked on his face." The item indicated he was pleased with the film.

> The 275-pound sergeant, who attended the Wednesday night premier here of the movie "Sergeant York" commented that "a fine job" was done in translating his war experiences to the screen. "Gary Cooper had me like I was years ago," he said with a laugh, "when I weighed only 170 pounds."

---

[25]Ibid., July 3, 1941, p. 15.

Near the end of July Sergeant York went to Washington to see President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who reportedly told the Tennessean that he was "thrilled" by the film and thought it came at "a good time" but that he did not like the violence in it. York reportedly agreed with him. The story ended on this note: "'I wish you could have had old Cordell take a part in it too; just as soon as he gets back he must see it,' the President remarked in a chuckling reference to Secretary Hull, another Tennessean."[26] Not everyone was as happy with the film as President Roosevelt. An item run in August, 1941, had this one-column headline: "Nye Says Films/ Spread War Wave// Senator Charges That Pictures/ Fan Hysteria."[27] Under a St. Louis dateline, the story began, "A charge that American motion picture companies 'have been operating as war propaganda machines almost as if they were directed from a single central bureau' was made tonight by Senator Nye before an America First Committee rally at the Opera House." Sergeant York was among the films that Nye mentioned as being objectionable.

Sergeant York's pro-war speech-making reached a climax on Armistice Day, 1941, when he spoke in Evansville, Indiana. The Times one-column headline said: "Lindbergh Scored/ By Sergeant York// Speeches of Flier and Others in America First Make for/ Perilous Smugness, He Says// Brands Them Appeasers// World War Hero Declares in/ Evansville He Is Proud to Be// Anti-Nazi Interventionist."[28] The story began:

---

[26]Ibid., July 31, 1941, p. 13.

[27]Ibid., Aug. 2, 1941, p. 16.

[28]Ibid., Nov. 12, 1941, p. 2.

> "America is in real danger today because it is smug and self satisfied and susceptible to overconfidence," Sergeant Alvin C. York, World War hero, said here today in an Armistice Day address. He blamed the activities of Charles A. Lindbergh and other leaders of the America First Committee for this condition.

In his Armistice Day speech President Roosevelt alluded to York's Memorial Day remarks at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, where he had said that Americans earned in World War I a lease on liberty, not a deed to it, and that freedom had to be earned repeatedly.[29] A Times editorial printed November 12 on page 22 pointed out the allusion and, referring to World War I, remarked that liberty and freedom "will not fail now if we defend it as bravely as it was defended then."

When next York was mentioned in the New York Times the United States was at war. York registered for the draft in April, 1942. The item carried a one-column headline: "'Ready To Go' Says York// World War Hero, 54, Registers/ 'In a Mighty Different Mood.'" According to the item, York "signed up . . . for possible military service at the same country store where he registered twenty-five years ago as a conscientious objector." He was quoted as saying, "'If they want me for duty, I'm ready to go.'"[30] In May York spoke up for his fellow mountaineers, many of whom were illiterate and many of whom were prospective draftees. The Times reported he had offered to raise a "battalion of them with himself as commander" and quoted him as saying, "'They are

---

[29]Ibid., p. 3.

[30]Ibid., April 28, 1942, p. 10.

crack shots. . . . They are the best soldiers in the world.'"[31] That same month York and Samuel Woodfill were given commissions as majors in the army. The Times' handling of the headline reveals York's higher status. The first deck had larger type. "Sgt. York Is Made/ Major In Infantry// Similar Commission Is Given/ Another Sergeant Hero of/ 1918 Samuel Woodfill// Mechanic Training Aided// Several Thousand in Air Force/ Will Have Post Graduate/ Study in Plane Plants."[32] The information is attributed to Under-Secretary Robert P. Patterson, who said the heroes would be assigned to the army ground forces for infantry work. The item recounted York's exploit but not Woodfill's. York did not accept his commission. There was talk in the spring of 1942 of his running for Congress on the Democratic ticket, but such a race never developed.[33]

York's sons and nephew became newsworthy when they entered the army in 1943 and 1944. When George E. York was inducted, the Times ran a two-column picture captioned "Following the Warpath of His Father." The following year another son, Woodrow Wilson York, and his cousin John Marion York were inducted, and again the Times ran a two-column picture.[34]

Among the less important of the 31 York items printed from 1940 to the end of the war was one final comment on World War II. Printed

---

[31]Ibid., May 3, 1942, IV, p. 2.

[32]Ibid., May 8, 1942, p. 11.

[33]Ibid., May 13, 1942, p. 7.

[34]Ibid., May 23, 1943, p. 16 and Feb. 25, 1944, p. 9.

September 2, 1944, on page 4, the one-column headline said "York Says Paratroopers/ On Berlin Could Win." The occasion was a meeting at Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia, with Sgt. Paul Huff, another Medal of Honor winner from Tennessee. Sergeant Huff was a paratrooper.

It was almost four years before York was mentioned again in the Times. The occasion was the thirtieth anniversary in 1948 of his feat in the Argonne. "Sergeant York--Then and Now" was the title of an article printed August 15 in the Times magazine.[35] The subhead said, "A prayerful fighter in World War I, today he runs his farm, his oil field, his Bible class and his agricultural school." The writer, S. J. Woolf, described York as "a sergeant about whose name clings a tale of heroism that still lives notwithstanding the fact that the man himself has passed into comparative obscurity in the valley." Woolf took the version of York's exploit from the Congressional Medal of Honor citation which had proved to be contrary to York's own version. At one point Woolf wrote, "Bidding several men to follow, he started for the Germans." Another inaccuracy is the quotation, "General Pershing said he was 'the greatest individual hero of the war.'" Calling York "the popular hero" of World War I, Woolf indicated the rest of York's life could be summed up in these events: his settling on the farm, the establishment of the school, his speeches for preparedness for World War II, his consent to the film version of his life, his establishment of a religious school, his visits to the training camps, his avoidance

---

[35]Ibid., Aug. 15, 1948, VI, p. 48.

of local politics, his "firm stand" with Russia, and his affirmations that the solution to all problems lies in the Bible.

On August 29, 1948, the Times ran again a two-column picture of the young hero and his mother in response to a letter requesting a reprint of the "wonderfully boyish picture of the young soldier York which ran in all the papers after the first World War."[36]

IV. ILLNESS AND FINANCIAL WOES

In the 1950's the hero was beset by two major difficulties--an illness that would leave him an invalid for the rest of his life and a demand by the federal government for more than $85,000 in back taxes. An announcement that York was ill with pneumonia in July, 1950, was followed by four years of silence.[37] Then in February, 1954, York was crippled by a stroke. The item reported under a Nashville dateline:

> Sgt. Alvin C. York, Medal of Honor winner and American's hero in World War I, was in serious condition at a Nashville hospital today after suffering a stroke. He was brought here from his Pall Mall home on the Kentucky border after he was stricken Wednesday. His age is 64. The famed soldier, once described by Gen. John J. Pershing as "America's outstanding soldier," won the Medal of Honor for wiping out a German machine gun company singlehanded.[38]

In May 1955 came the first mention in the Times of the government's tax suit against York. The suit was reportedly being delayed until York recovered sufficiently from his illness. Said the item, "The government

---

[36]Ibid., Aug. 29, 1948, p. 2.

[37]Ibid., July 3, 1950, p. 17.

[38]Ibid., Feb. 28, 1954, p. 69.

seeks to collect $85,442.03 more from his 1942-43 income, represented principally by receipts from a motion picture based on his war exploits."[39] The Times announced later in the year that York had applied for the $10-a-month pension that "Medal of Honor winners are entitled to."[40]

The one major tribute to the hero in the 1950's as reported in the Times was the ceremonies on the York Institute campus at which the 82nd Airborne Division presented him "with a special car in which a wheel chair had been installed." The item described York as follows:

> Sgt. Alvin C. York, a Tennessee mountaineer once described by the late General of the Armies John J. Pershing as "the greatest hero" of World War I, heard high Army officials and other pay tribute to him this afternoon. . . .
>
> Sergeant York suffered a paralytic stroke in 1954. Today he was smiling as a forty-piece Eighty-Second Division band from Ft. Bragg, N. C., struck up "Over There" and "It's a Long Way to Tipperary."[41]

York's tax problems would not be settled until the 1960's. In February, 1959, the Tennessee House of Representatives asked the Internal Revenue Service to "'go easy'" in prosecuting the hero.[42]

The sergeant lived only four years into the new decade. Thirty York items were printed in the Times from March 23, 1960, until September 6, 1964, when the hero was buried. Fifteen of these items concern his illnesses and his death. Ten are concerned with the government's tax suit against him. In a 1960 announcement that York had

---

[39] Ibid., May 3, 1955, p. 19.

[40] Ibid., Dec. 31, 1955, p. 30.

[41] Ibid., Aug. 22, 1957, p. 24.

[42] Ibid., Feb. 18, 1959, p. 13.

applied for Social Security benefits, he was identified as "celebrated hero of World War I who in recent years has had income tax troubles with the government."[43]

The Tennessee American Legion met in September, 1960, and planned to raise part of the money York allegedly owed the government. The story from the Associated Press said:

> The Internal Revenue Service says Mr. York, now 72 years old did not calculate his income tax correctly on the $150,000 he received for the movie rights to his biography in 1941.
>
> Mr. York, who lives in the hills near Pall Mall, Tenn., regards the tax claim with indifference. He says he does not owe a cent.
>
> "When I got that money I paid them half and told 'em the other half was mine," he said.[44]

A final paragraph contains possibly the worst error ever printed about York's Argonne exploit. "He won fame as an infantryman when he killed about 132 in 1918. That won him sergeant stripes and the Medal of Honor."

On the forty-third anniversary of York's feat in the Argonne the governor of Tennessee, Buford Ellington, and the national American Legion commander, Martin B. McNeally, "led a motorcade into the Tennessee hill country to pay tribute to the man who won the Medal of Honor in the Argonne Forest."[45] The item recited a list of the tragedies that had beset York.

---

[43]Ibid., March 23, 1960, p. 25.

[44]Ibid., Sept. 8, 1960, p. 13.

[45]Ibid., Oct. 9, 1960, p. 3.

> Sergeant York, now bedridden and plagued by financial worries, was presented with an electrically operated bed and the state's best wishes.
>
> Since 1942 Sergeant York has suffered lobar pneumonia, heart trouble, high blood pressure, a hemorrhage in his right eye and a stroke that left him almost completely paralyzed.

In the late fall of 1960 George R. Dempster of Knoxville reportedly wrote to President Eisenhower asking that he use his influence to get York's tax debt canceled. He was told that at that time no collection proceedings had been instituted against Sergeant York.[46] In March 1961 Sam Rayburn, speaker of the House of Representatives, began a fund-raising drive for York by personally contributing $1000. Said the Times item: "Mr. York once owed the Government $172,000 in back taxes. The Internal Revenue Service notified Mr. Rayburn that it would compromise and reduce the debt to $25,000 because of Mr. York's inability to pay."[47] In less than a month the money had been raised through public contributions. Said the Times one-column headline: "10,000 Give to End/ Hero's Tax Debt// Campaign To Aid Sgt. York/ Is Hailed as a Success/ --$27,000 Donated."[48] The item said: "His monthly income consists of a $135.45 veterans pension, $32 in social security and $10 as a Medal of Honor winner. His medical expenses since suffering the stroke have mounted to $2,700 and he owes a grocery bill of $400." The excess funds raised were to be held in trust for York and given to him according to his needs.

---

[46] Ibid., Nov. 20, 1960, p. 129.

[47] Ibid., March 19, 1961, p. 82.

[48] Ibid., April 9, 1961, p. 76.

The tax story would not die despite the fact that the case had been declared closed. A statement in April from Internal Revenue Commissioner Mortimer M. Caplin that York received "no special advantage" in the settlement[49] was followed days later by a detailed release from the government on the sergeant's financial situation.

> The Government today bared the financial woes of Sgt. Alvin C. York, the World War I hero whose tax debt was paid off this week through public contributions.
>
> The Internal Revenue Service said Mr. York, a Medal of Honor winner, has only $2.20 in the bank, is burdened with heavy debts, but has an interest in 2,000 acres of land. It said he reported an income of $3,483.15 in 1959.
>
> The revenue service had been trying to collect from Mr. York $85,442 plus accumulated interest amounting to an additional total of $87,155. . . .
>
> The agency said it settled for $25,000 because "it appears to be in excess of the sum collectible from a forced sale of all the taxpayer's assets, and it gives adequate consideration of his earning capacity and future prospects."
>
> Mr. York, on this income, supports his 61-year-old wife, Gracie, and his 79-year-old sister-in-law Kansas Williams.[50]

The following month financier S. Hallock du Pont of Wilmington, Delaware, set up a trust fund for Sergeant York which would pay him $300 a month for life.[51]

In the summer of 1961 about 300 veterans of World War I gathered in Crossville, Tennessee, to honor the hero, but York was bedridden and unable to make the trip.[52] On his seventy-fourth birthday the Times printed a letter written by a York fan who said, "Americans salute the

---

[49]Ibid., April 10, 1961, p. 76.

[50]Ibid., April 20, 1961, p. 34.

[51]Ibid., May 26, 1961, p. 9.

[52]Ibid., July 17, 1961, p. 18.

indomitable Sergeant York who helped preserve freedom for our nation."[53] In January, 1962, York's granddaughter was sworn into the Women's Air Force at his bedside.[54]

On May 28, 1962, appeared the first of the final series of York stories, 16 items concerned with his travels to and from local and Nashville hospitals, his bad turns and improvements, treatment of various ailments, the calling of his family to his bedside, his subsequent improvement, and his death and burial. On May 23, 1964, he was reported to have been hospitalized for the ninth time in two years.[55] The only item not concerned with his illnesses or his death was a September 4, 1962, report on page 67 that his barn had burned.

V. A FINAL TRIBUTE

Alvin C. York achieved on September 3, 1964, what he had never been able to achieve while he lived. The story of his death and his obituary made the front page of the New York Times under a three-column headline: "Sergeant York, War Hero Dies// Killed 25 Germans/ and Captured 132/ in Argonne Battle." The 80-inch story, accompanied by three pictures, had a Nashville dateline and this opening:

> Sgt. Alvin C. York, the reluctant World War I infantryman who became an American legend, died this morning at Veterans Administration Hospital after a long illness. He was 76 years old.

---

[53] Ibid., Dec. 13, 1961, p. 42.

[54] Ibid., Jan. 4, 1962, p. 35.

[55] Ibid., May 23, 1964, p. 57.

> On Oct. 8, 1918, during the final offensive of the war, the Tennessee mountaineer whose religious convictions at first kept him from fighting, singlehandedly captured or killed an entire German machine-gun battalion.
>
> Thereafter his life became a tangle of parades, political appearances and unpaid taxes. But the sergeant's modesty and devotion to his people in the steep Cumberland hills kept him clear of the hero's life and added to the legend.

President Lyndon Johnson was reported to have said of York:

> "Sgt. Alvin Cullom York has stood as a symbol of American courage and sacrifice for almost half a century. His valor above and beyond the call of duty, in World War I, was recognized with the nation's highest award, the Medal of Honor. As the citizen-soldier hero of the American Expeditionary Forces, he epitomized the gallantry of American fighting men and their sacrifice in behalf of freedom."

The item then quoted Foch and Pershing's statements about the hero and added:

> The red-haired, freckle-faced Tennessee mountaineer would color and say it was "nuthin'."
>
> "I wanted to do the best I could," was his usual explanation.
>
> Sergeant York was the latterday descendent of the American frontier, a plain-talking, no-nonsense sharpshooter who combined in his big, lanky frame the backwoods world of turkey shoots and corn liquor and the fundamentalist piety of his mountain home. For an American fighting its first war on foreign soil, he was the perfect hero.
>
> Later when he was surrounded but not taken by fame, he extended the legend beyond the limits set by such as Davy Crockett. He founded an agricultural and industrial school for the undereducated children of the mountains, and he issued statements that made sense to his rural countrymen--and to some patriots in big cities.
>
> "Hitler and Mussolini jes' need a good whuppin'," he said in 1938, "and it looks like Uncle Sam's gonna have to do it." The phrase was widely quoted in the nation's press.
>
> Until this century military history had been dominated by the names of generals and great strategists. But with the rise of the popular press, the common soldier was discovered and adulated. Sergeant York was the first in this line--a line continued by Audie Murphy, Roger Young and a number of other World War II enlisted men.
>
> On Nov. 11, 1941, in an Armistice Day speech that preceded the second war by 26 days President Roosevelt paid tribute to

> York and the common soldier by quoting the sergeant's answer to the cynics and scoffers who sneered at World War I.
>
> "The thing they forget," the sergeant had said, "is that liberty and freedom and democracy are so very precious that you do not fight to win them once and stop."

Here the account repeats the tale of York's feat in the Argonne with one noticeable difference. The writer leaves out the part about the party of men coming upon the breakfasting Germans and has the entire 17 man squad running into the nests of German gunners. Near the end of the story the reporter notes that "It became obligatory for Tennessee politicians running for office to pose for campaign pictures with him."

The same day the Times published an editorial about York on page 28. Here is some of what it said:

> Alvin York made greatness out of simplicity and courage. His feat in the Argonne Forest in 1918 was a triumph of the individual soldier over the armies who went to be slaughtered and the generals who sent men to die by the hundreds of thousands in the most horrible of all wars. When the smoke of battle cleared, Americans did not want to remember the generals. They remembered the Unknown Soldier and of all the soldiers, living and dead, they remembered Sergeant York.
>
> He was truly American in an old fashioned sense. He was rooted, like a tree, to his Tennessee mountains, simple, unassuming and so deeply religious that at first he was a conscientious objector. The same strength of character that gave him the courage to be a pacifist permitted him when his convictions changed, to be a completely dedicated soldier, a civilian briefly in uniform. He came from a farm and went back to one, no richer in worldly wealth though he placed a nation in his debt. He will remain a symbol and a legend so long as American history is recorded. One likes to think that the United States was built and protected by such men, simple and pure men who provided the solid foundation on which the more brilliant and imaginative could build.

The story of the funeral at Pall Mall, attended by 8,000, was dropped back to page 57 on September 6. Identified as the "doughboy hero of World War I" and a "one-time conscientious objector," York was said to

have been "eulogized as the type of Christian American upon whom the nation rests its hopes for the future."

CHAPTER VI

THE MAKING AND MAINTENANCE OF "SERGEANT YORK"

The steps by which the press made York the most popular hero of World War I can be traced by examining the communication messages about him and the development of the story that carried to American minds the image of "Sergeant York," the embodiment of American ideals for that particular period of history.

The relative unimportance of the Argonne feat itself is demonstrated by the fact that the War Department release containing the Congressional Medal of Honor citation and the announcement of the award attracted little notice in the press. Only four of the six Tennessee newspapers examined used the item released in mid-March of 1919. Newspapers really paid no attention to York until two magazines published articles about him in April, 1919, while he was still in Europe. Joseph Cummings Chase's article titled "Corporal York, General Pershing, and Others" appeared in World's Work. Most of the material about York in the article is quoted from General George B. Duncan, 82nd Division Commander. Only a short final paragraph describes the meeting between Chase and York, who is depicted more as a country simpleton than a heroic figure. The tremendously influential article that established the image of Sergeant York for readers of America's most popular magazine was George Pattullo's "The Second Elder Gives Battle," published in the April 26, 1919, issue of the Saturday Evening Post. York's incredible battle

story with its suggestion of the miraculous is of less importance in this article than Pattullo's reaction to and assessment of the man himself and his admirable and "heroic" qualities. Some of these qualities were York's impressive appearance, his modesty, his poise, his skill with a rifle, his faith and morals, his colorful past, and his devotion to his mother and his country. In the article Pattullo does not attempt to restrain his enthusiasm or to give an unbiased view of York. The hero is presented as nothing short of the ideal soldier, the ideal American, the ideal human being.

It is difficult to assess the role of the Army in getting the story published and establishing the image. War correspondents were said to be relatively free of censorship near the end of the war and after the Armistice when the Pattullo article must have been written. But Joseph Cummings Chase, by his own admission, painted York's portrait at the urging of General George B. Duncan and quoted Duncan's somewhat distorted version of the battle story. Pattullo must have worked closely with York's commanding officers, for he emphasizes in the story that York's feat had been thoroughly investigated by his superior officers and that no inaccuracies could be found. Later when York returned home he told a Knoxville audience that Pattullo's account was accurate, and he implied that his commanding officers had had some control over what was printed in the article.

In the early publicity are flat denials that York had actually resisted the draft. York did request exemption and admitted the fact freely in later years. It is possible the Army tried to suppress the

fact to avoid marring the image of what otherwise seemed like a perfect hero. Since both General Duncan's version of the story as reported by Chase and the Congressional Medal of Honor citation released by the War Department contain similar inaccuracies--that York led a group of men in a charge on the German machine gun nests--Duncan was apparently the source of the version reported in the citation. The general told a banquet gathering in New York on the hero's return that he had investigated the report and had made the recommendation that York receive the Congressional Medal of Honor.

Three of the six Tennessee newspapers examined printed all or part of the Pattullo article or called attention to it in an editorial. One newspaper printed the Chase portrait of York with Pattullo's story, and a fourth printed part of the Chase article with the portrait. The Nashville Banner within days of the publication of Pattullo's story sent a correspondent to Pall Mall to find York's relatives. The Commercial Appeal, Memphis, announced "he" was coming home. Reporters met General Duncan when he arrived in New York to ask if the stories about York were true.

A major event stimulated by the Pattullo article was the Tennessee Society's reception for the hero in New York. The event was carefully planned to be the biggest reception ever accorded a returning hero, and the society sent advance press releases with an inaccurate date causing newspapers that used the item to print it before York had arrived. In its coverage of the hero's activities the New York press reiterated the Pattullo image of the hero and expanded on it. The New York press had

caught the spirit of the Pattullo article, and reporters for the Herald and the Tribune wrote mostly feature material about York and let their own impressions of the hero show through even in the unsigned articles. They even used some direct borrowings from Pattullo's story. The New York press was able to reinforce and expand on Pattullo's image of York by showing the man in different situations--speaking at a banquet, riding the New York subway, visiting the Stock Exchange, going to the theatre, meeting legislators in Washington, arriving home, and getting married. His responses to these situations as well as the reported public response to him (the traffic jams and cheering crowds) enlarged his image. The newspapers were able to elaborate on facets of his character untouched by Pattullo or Chase--his refusal to make money deals or to capitalize on his fame by going on stage or into motion pictures, his romance and wedding to the shy, unsophisticated Grace Williams, a feature that proved to be one of the strongest of the homecoming publicity.

Tennessee newspapers, first moved by the Pattullo article, were further stimulated by the attentions focused on York by the New York newspapers, especially the Herald and the Tribune. On first personal contact with the hero, Tennessee reporters studied the man in an attempt to report something of his character overlooked by the New York reporters. They seemed to be searching for the key to the man's greatness--but not for flaws in the image. There was a universal effort of the Tennessee press to reinforce the image rather than tear it down. For reporters mostly stayed within the limits of the hero's image already set by the

Pattullo article and the newspaper publicity. Charles Forbes' articles in the June 8 and June 15 issues of the Knoxville Journal and Tribune are the most objective, clear-eyed looks at York discovered in the Tennessee press. But even these articles do the established York image no real harm. The hero's advisers and associates are the ones who suffer from Forbes' scrutiny. Having exhausted their creativity on the hero, some Tennessee reporters turned to York's teenage bride and his mother for material. Eventually York items in the Tennessee press assumed more of a straight news character. The flow of news items ended with the return of the couple from their Nashville honeymoon.

The New York Times displayed for its 1919 publicity less concern and more skepticism for the hero than any other newspaper examined. But that newspaper was not without its romantic touches also--for instance, "Ballad of Redhead's Day," a poem published soon after York arrived in the United States. Overall the Times used the straight news approach to York stories. Reporters did not use the term "singlehanded" to refer to York's Argonne feat. Neither did they borrow directly from Pattullo, although they did seem to conduct their interviews along the lines established in the Pattullo article. A Times editorial praised York's decision to stop public exhibition of himself by ending his honeymoon trip after the Nashville visit. York's name never once appeared on the Times front page during this period of homecoming publicity.

Much of the 1919 publicity gave the impression of a man who did not particularly enjoy the limelight, a man who would be happy to retire to his farm and the simple life never to emerge again as a public figure.

The 109 York items printed in the New York Times between 1919 and his death in 1964 indicate either that the initial impression was wrong or that York was changed by his experiences in the limelight. Perhaps he came to see himself differently and took on the responsibilities he believed accompanied the laurels of heroism.

Throughout the rest of his life after 1919 York seemed to put himself in the way of publicity. And as the years passed and York became a permanent fixture among praiseworthy Americans, the Times' traces of skepticism disappeared. Reporters called him the "greatest hero of World War I" and used "singlehanded" to describe his Argonne feat. When challenges to York's reputation came from members of his platoon, the Times reiterated all the old assurances that the hero was authentic. As he grew older he came to be portrayed as a sort of homespun philosopher and a man who took stubborn stands on issues but who was quite capable of reversing a stand.

The Times publicity reveals York's life to be a series of paradoxes. The man opposed to war became its greatest hero. The shy, reticent man became a speaker. The uneducated mountaineer became the founder of a school. The former pacifist became a vocal supporter of America's entry into World War II. The man who said he would never try to make money from his fame went on the lecture circuit and eventually sold his story to a film producer. The man who had been so instinctively right in battle was disastrously wrong where money was concerned. Especially during the 1940's the image took on political overtones in York's attacks on isolationists and his alignment with President Roosevelt. The motion

picture Sergeant York, released in the summer of 1941, stimulated the attention of the print media and did more to perpetuate York's fame than any other single factor.

Tragedies colored his later years. The Times stories drew a man bedridden and burdened by financial troubles, including a tax debt of more than $85,000 owed to the Internal Revenue Service. As they had come to his aid in 1921 when he almost lost his farm, the American people came to his aid again and paid off his tax debt. The strong man had become weak, the hero a pitiful figure. But age, disease, and all the misfortunes he suffered could not take away the fact of his heroism or the title the press had given him, the "greatest" hero of World War I. When York died in September, 1964, the New York Times put his death story and obituary on the front page under a three-column headline and in an editorial accorded him a place among the nation's great and legendary figures.

An analyst could find in the York saga the familiar propaganda devices: plain folks, bandwagon, testimonial, transfer, and glittering generalities. Obvious too are some of the weaknesses of popular journalism and of readers who respond to such methods--the simplification of a complex conflict such as World War I by the singling out of heroes; the effect of a superlative such as "greatest hero" or "greatest single feat" in creating news; and the extension of a popular figure's opinion into such areas as military strategy and foreign policy where he is not an authority.

To find a story possessing more "human interest" elements than the York story would have been difficult in 1919 and perhaps even today.

Adventure, religion, patriotism, romance, and a kind of innocence all mingled in the tale, and those publications that, capitalizing on these elements, attempted to "sell" York as the "greatest" hero of the war were primarily interested in selling magazines or newspapers.

The continuing interest of the press in York's activities and opinions perhaps reflects the tenacity with which Americans cling to their symbols. Even when the man weakened and failed, the symbol stood. Through the 1919 publicity "Sergeant York" had become a "great American," a symbol embodying American ideals and capable of arousing a response in the imaginations and sentiments of Americans. As a consequence, he could have been used, indeed must have been used to some extent, to "sell" goods or ideas to the public. The extent to which he was exploited or manipulated will probably never be known.

A man can only be glimpsed in the material a newspaper prints about him. And the glimpses are colored by the individuality of the people who write the stories and the stereotypes of a culture. How well the press image of "Sergeant York" fit Alvin C. York of Pall Mall cannot be precisely known. But the essence of the man is conspicuously absent from the publicity. Perhaps it is this cloaking of the real or inner man which allows, through the blending of myth and reality, the creation of a legend.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Chase, Joseph Cummings. "Corporal York, General Pershing, and Others." World's Work, XXXVII, April, 1919, 636-653.

The Chattanooga Times. March 22, 1919-June 15, 1919.

The Commercial Appeal, Memphis. March 22, 1919-June 15, 1919.

Cowan, Sam. Sgt. York and His People. New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1922.

Crozier, Emmett. American Reporters on the Western Front 1914-1918. New York: Oxford University Press, 1959.

Emery, Edwin. The Press and America. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1972.

Forrest, Wilbur. Behind the Front Page. New York: D. Appleton-Century Co., 1934.

Gibbons, Edward. Floyd Gibbons. New York: Exposition Press, 1953.

Hohenberg, John. Foreign Correspondence: The Great Reporters and Their Times. New York: Columbia University Press, 1964.

Irwin, Will. The Making of a Reporter. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1942.

The Knoxville Journal and Tribune. March 22, 1919-June 15, 1919.

Miller, Webb. I Found No Peace. New York: the Literary Guild, 1936.

Mock, James Robert and Cedric Larson. Words That Won the War. New York: Knopf, 1940.

Mott, Frank L. American Journalism. New York: The Macmillan Co., 1962.

The New York Herald. March 22, 1919-June 15, 1919.

The New York Times. March 22, 1919-Sept. 6, 1964.

The New York Tribune. March 22, 1919-June 15, 1919.

Pattullo, George. "The Second Elder Gives Battle." The Saturday Evening Post, CXCI, April 26, 1919, 78f.

Pershing, John J. My Experiences in the World War. New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1931.

Peterson, H. C. Propaganda For War. Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1939.

Peterson, Theodore. Magazines in the Twentieth Century. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1964.

Seldes, George. Tell the Truth and Run. New York: Greenburg, 1953.

Schott, Joseph L. Above and Beyond: The Story of the Congressional Medal of Honor. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1963.

Skeyhill, Tom, ed. Sgt. York: His Own Life and War Diary. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Doran, 1928.

Skeyhill, Thomas John. Sergeant York; Last of the Long Hunters. Chicago: The John Winston Company, n.d.

Tompkins, Raymond. "First Page Stuff: 1918." American Mercury, XX, August, 1930, 469-477.

Who's Who in America, XVI. Chicago: The A. N. Marquis Company, 1931.

VITA

A native of Allardt, Tennessee, in Fentress County, Sandra Lee Stephens was born August 21, 1945.

She was graduated from Alvin C. York Agricultural Institute, Jamestown, Tennessee, in 1962 and is a graduate of the University of Tennessee where she received a Bachelor of Arts degree in English in 1965 and a Master of Science degree in Communications in 1974. She is a member of Kappa Tau Alpha.

She has worked as a reporter for the Herald-Citizen in Cookeville, Tennessee, and the Tennessean in Nashville and as editor of the Campbell County Times in LaFollette, Tennessee. She also has taught English at York Institute and at Clarkrange High School in Fentress County.