

## U.S. Army Europe and 7th Army

contact: paoci@eur.army.mil  
phone: 49-6221-57-5815 / DSN 370-5815  
fax: 49-6221-57-6376 / DSN 370-6376



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### Allies conduct ceremonies to honor U.S. World War I hero Sgt. Alvin York

By Dave Melancon, U.S. Army Europe PAO

CHATEL-CHÉHÉRY, France -- More than 600 Soldiers, family members, American Boy Scouts, and history enthusiasts from around the world joined with residents of Chatel-Chéhéry village and the French military to salute one of the U.S. Army's best-known heroes Oct. 4.

Sgt. Alvin York, Company G, 328th Infantry Regiment, 82nd Infantry Division, was honored for his service during a memorial ceremony and official dedication of two monuments marking the site where he killed 25 German Imperial Army soldiers, captured 132 more and cleared 32 machine gun positions Oct. 8, 1918.



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Retired Army Col. Gerald York, grandson of World War I Medal of Honor recipient Sgt. Alvin C. York, talks about his grandfather's values and legacy during commemoration ceremonies in the village of Chatel-Chéhéry, France, Oct. 4.

York was awarded the Medal of Honor and several other U.S., French and Italian decorations for his actions and valor.

York's unit, the 82nd Infantry, the "All American" Division as it was known then, was part of the American Expeditionary Force's I Corps during the Meuse-Argonne Offensive, one of five major battles that the Allies called the "Grand Offensive," which were fought from about Sept. 26 through Nov. 11, 1918. The Allies hoped that these simultaneous attacks across the Western Front would overwhelm the Germans and end the war in 1918.

Although York is best known for earning the Medal of Honor, he wanted to be remembered for what he did after he returned from war, York's grandson, retired Army Col. Gerald York said. York, who had only an elementary school-level education, leveraged his wartime fame to raise funds for a high school in his native Tennessee. He also administered the school for several years.

"He wanted to be remembered as a man of peace rather than a man of war, and for his belief in God," York said.

The Medal of Honor recipient's son, George Edward Buxton York, and granddaughter, Deborah York, also attended the village ceremony and helped unveil a plaque commemorating York's deeds.

“No free nation today is unaware of the performance he (York) turned in during World War I,” said Brig. Gen. Jeffrey G. Smith, Jr., 5th Signal Command commanding general. “It is the story of Yankee ingenuity. A man whose ability to shoot sharply, his ability to lead naturally, his sense of judgment, his humility are the values we like to think are the products of our country, states and small towns. Above all, he was flesh and blood.”

Smith said that although he recognized York and the Soldiers of World War I during the series of ceremonies, he was also praising and honoring the Soldiers he leads and serves with today.

“Sgt. York has given me an opportunity to thank them,” Smith said after delivering his address in the Chatel-Chéhéry village square. “We’re remembering the great sacrifice of Soldiers in earlier wars and it is through them that we thank the extraordinary heroism that our Soldiers are currently displaying.”

In addition to the ceremonies honoring York, Smith and the 1st Infantry Division honor guard who, traveled to the Meuse-Argonne from Fort Riley, Kan., participated in six ceremonies in the battlefield region that weekend to commemorate the end of World War I, said LeAnne MacAllister, 5th Signal Command public affairs officer.

Twenty American, French and Canadian Soldiers, Airmen, Marines and Sailors from U.S. and NATO bases in Europe served as the ceremonial honor platoon for the ceremonies.

Cities and towns throughout France commemorated the 90th anniversary of the Meuse-Argonne Offensive and the United States Soldiers’ actions during the war, said Lt. Col. Douglas Mastriano, chief of the NATO Allied Land Component Command Headquarters intelligence division and cofounder of the Sergeant York Discovery Expedition.

SYDE is recognized by the U.S. Army Center for Military History, several historical societies, French local and regional authorities and the French Military Mission to NATO for finding the exact site of York’s actions, he said.

Mastriano used hundreds of official U.S. and German military documents to conduct an inch-by-inch search of the area. With the assistance of several friends and family members, the SYDE team recovered thousands of spent rounds, buttons, cartridge casings and other U.S. and German military artifacts to pinpoint the locations. These artifacts will soon be given to the Center of Military History for display in museums across the United States, he said.

For York, the day started off badly on 8 October 1918. His battalion was ordered to charge across a funnel-shaped valley into the Argonne Forest. If successful, they would outflank the Germans and force them out of the Argonne. When the Americans attacked that morning, the German 2nd Landwehr Division, from the German Kingdom of Württemberg, was ready. Once York’s battalion was in the valley, the Germans opened fire from three sides, stopping the Americans in a death trap. As the battalion’s casualties mounted,



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Lt. Col. Douglas Mastriano, chief of the NATO Allied Land Component Command Headquarters intelligence section and co-leader of the Sergeant York Discovery Expedition, talks about the Medal of Honor recipient’s actions after the unveiling of monuments honoring York and other World War I Soldiers in the woods near the village of Chatel-Chéhéry, France, Oct. 4.

York and 16 other Americans were ordered to break through the German line to take out the machine guns that were holding up the American advance.

The 17 “doughboys” found a gap in the German line and surprised more than 80 German soldiers in a meadow. As the Americans organized their prisoners, a nearby German machine gun team on the hill above saw the Americans and, after yelling to the Germans to take cover, opened fire. Of the 17 Americans, York was the only noncommissioned officer left in action. He took charge of the remaining seven American Soldiers.

His Medal of Honor citation says at this point in the battle, “Cpl. York assumed command. Fearlessly leading seven men, he charged with great daring a machine gun nest which was pouring deadly and incessant fire upon his platoon. In this heroic feat, the machine gun nest was taken, together with four officers, 128 men and several guns.”

York’s actions broke the German line, saved his battalion from defeat and triggered the German retreat from the Argonne Forest, Mastriano said.

Following the Chatel-Chéhéry ceremony, about 400 onlookers, many hiking about a mile and a half on a trail blazed by Heidelberg-area Boy Scouts in July, attended the unveiling of memorials honoring York, his comrades, allied and German soldiers who died during the campaign.

While York was the focus of the memorial, the monument honors all Soldiers who fought for their countries and for what they believed in, said German army Lt. Col. Steff Basener, NATO Land Forces Command Headquarters.

“Many proud German regiments fought in the Argonne and basically stopped existing nearly 90 years ago,” he said.

“Right here, dozens of German infantrymen fell in close combat when engaging York’s brave squad,” Basener said. “They sacrificed their lives for what they thought was a just cause. While nations fought here for differing causes, all Soldiers, regardless of their uniform fought here for but one cause: duty to country.”

Today the U.S. and German armies stand together as allies and share the same battlefields against common enemies, he said.

While the 82nd Infantry Division of World War I is now known as the 82nd Airborne Division, York’s sense of duty, valor and honor have not changed and are instilled into every one of the division’s paratroopers, said Sgt. Maj. Jose Salas, the 82nd Airborne Division intelligence section sergeant major.

“I know that Sgt. Alvin York would have made a great paratrooper,” he said. Fort Bragg memorialized York, one of the 82nd’s five Medal of Honor recipients, when officials at the North Carolina post named its installation theater for him, and paratroopers learn of his exploits during their tours of duty there.



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A trio of French army World War I re-enactors read a plaque commemorating Sgt. Alvin York’s battlefield actions after the unveiling of monuments honoring York and other World War I Soldiers in the woods near the village of Chatel-Chéhéry, France, Oct. 4.

“You better believe that every paratrooper knows about Sgt. York and his accomplishments,” Salas said.

York’s leaders and most of his squad were killed, leaving the sergeant alone on the battlefield, he continued.

“He did not run. He did not seek cover,” Salas said. “Instead, he did what every good American Soldier would do. He dropped to the prone position and began the assault.”

York’s actions and those of thousands of other allied Soldiers broke the German lines, ending the four-year occupation and leading to the end of the war, he said.

Although the dedication ceremonies are complete, there is still work to be done, Mastriano said. Boy Scouts and other volunteers will continue working on the historic trail and landscaping around the monuments.

The commemoration was the largest celebration in Chatel-Chéhéry since 1918, and the largest event in France in more than 10 years honoring Americans who served in World War I, he said.

“The overwhelming attendance -- one of the biggest (audiences) for a World War One commemoration -- states clearly that the debate over what York did Oct. 8, 1918 is over,” Mastriano said. “We had people from across academia, the 82nd Airborne Division, 1st Infantry Division, three generations of the York family, the American Battle Monuments Commission, several NATO nations and many more accepting the dedication of the York trail and the location of the monuments as accurate. The fact that the French allowed us to build a trail and erect monuments on the spot says it all. Finally, we have proven that York did what he was awarded the Medal of Honor for. Both the U.S. and German archives agree and the archeological evidence that we recovered confirmed it. Those who sought to rewrite history have been relegated to a footnote in history.”

While the dedication and the ceremonies symbolize York and his heroism, it is the man the events celebrated, Mastriano said.

“I hope that the participants came away with an impression of the type of hero York was and that his strong faith and personal relationship with God equipped him with the courage to accomplish what he did,” he said. “He is a man of honor worthy of emulation.”



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