Alvin York was born in 1887 in a one-room cabin in a mountain valley just three miles south of the Kentucky line. Alvin's father was a blacksmith, whose smithy was a cave. But Mr. York liked hunting best of all. He and Alvin were often gone for days on hunting trips.

Young Alvin became an early master of the family's handmade cap and ball muzzle-loading rifle. Because every game animal was needed for meat, Alvin learned how to kill a squirrel or a turkey with a precise shot to the head, saving the meat for eating.

As a teenager, Alvin York worked on railroad crews and picked up many bad habits from the older men. He later recalled: “I read about Frank and Jesse James. ... muss up that tree right smart. And I got tolerably accurate, too. I used to drink a lot of moonshine. I used to gamble my wages away week after week. I used to stay out late at nights. I had a powerful lot of fist fights.”

At age 27, the rowdy York fell in love with Grace Williams, the teenage daughter of a deeply religious family. She insisted that he give up drinking and fighting if he intended to win her.

On Jan. 1, 1915, Alvin York made a personal commitment to Jesus and joined the Church of Christ in Christian Union (cccU). The cccU was a fundamentalist sect that had spun off from the Methodists during the Civil War. The church had few established doctrines, but instead required members to read the Bible and to draw their own conclusions. The church did not formally have pacifist doctrines, but one of the reasons for the split from the Methodists was that the Christian Union founders had refused to support Methodist resolutions backing the Union cause during the Civil War.
Y ork began picking off the German machine-gunners with his Enfield rifle. “In order to sight me or to swing their machine guns on me, the Germans had to show their heads above the trench, and every time I saw a head I just touched it off. All the time I kept yelling at them to come down. I didn’t want to kill any more than I had to. But it was they or I, and I was giving them the best I had.”

When one of Y ork’s five-round ammunition clips ran out, the Germans commenced a bayonet charge, figuring that at least one of the Germans could get to Y ork before he could reload. “I touched off the sixth man first, then third, and so on. I wanted them to keep coming. I didn’t want the rear ones to see me touching off the front ones. I was afraid they would drop down and pump a volley into me. ”

Corporal Alvin Y ork and the seven remaining able-bodied Americans faced the task of controlling several dozen German prisoners and getting them through German territory and back to the American lines. On the march back, Y ork’s group ran into two other groups of Germans and bluff ed to make money from his fame. But as the Second World War began to threaten the United States, he finally consented to the production of a biographical movie. Almost single-handedly, Y ork—with his one rifl e and one pistol—had killed 25 Germans and knocked 35 German machine guns out of action.

In our shooting matches at home we shot at a turkey’s head. We tied the turkey behind a log, and every time it bobbed up its head we let fly with those old muzzled guns. We paid 10 cents a shot, and if we hit the turkey’s head we got to keep the whole turkey. This way we learn to shoot from almost 60 yards. Or we would tie the turkey out in the open at 150 yards, and if you hit it above the eye on one side, the gills you got it. I think we had just about the best shots that ever squatted down a barrel. Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett used to shoot at matches like this long ago. And Andrew Jackson used to recruit his Tennessee sharpshooters from among our mountain shooters.

We used to call our most famous matches “beerwes.” We would make up a beef, that is, we would drive up a beef and then each pay, say a dollar until we had made up the value of the beast. The owner got this money. And we were each allowed so many shots. The best shot got the choice of the hind quarters, the second best the other hind quarters, the third the choice of the fore quarters, the fourth the other fore quarters, and the fifth the hide and tallow.

Our matches were held in an openning in the forest, and the shooters would come in from all over the mountains, and there would be a great time. We used to have a mark crisscrossed on a tree. The distance was 26 yards offhand or 40 yards prone with a rest. You had to hit that cross if you ever hoped to get all of that meat. Some of our mountainers were such wonderful shots that they would win all five prizes and drive the beef home alive on the hoof. Shooting at squirrels was good, but killing a turkey at 150 yards—no ho. So the Army shooting was tolerably easy as could be. He believed that God was with him. He later explained, “We know there are miracles, don’t we? Well this was one. I was taken care of—the only way I can figure it.”

When Y ork returned to the battle scene to give a tour to American General Julian Lindsey, the general asked, “Y ork, how did you do it?” And I answered him, “Sir, it is not man power. A higher power than man power guided and watched over me and told me what to do.” And the general bowed his head and put his hand on my shoulder and solemnly said, “Y ork, you are right.”

When Y ork returned to the United States in the spring of 1919, he became one of the most famous men in America, thanks to a lead article in the Saturday Evening Post (“The Second Elder Gives Battle,” April 26, 1919, by George Patrella.).

On May 22, New York City gave Y ork a ticker-tape parade. At first, he thought the confetti falling from the skyscrapers was snow. “It was very nice,” he wrote in his diary. “But I sure wanted to get back to my people where I belonged, and the little old mother and the little mountain girl who were waiting. I wanted to be in the mountains again. Then I would plant an apple tree a canoe or knock over a red fox. And in the midst of the crowds and the dinners and receptions I couldn’t help thinking of these things.”

When he finally got home, “I didn’t do any hunting for a few days. I was telling you I went hunting Osceola first.” Finally, “I got out with the muzzled old muzzled slinger; and I got to thinking and wondering what it was I had come after. And I went back to the place on the mountain where I prayed before the war and received my assurance from God that I would go back there and come back, and I just stayed out there and thanked that same God who had taken me through the war.” Y ork received the Medal of Honor and the Distinguished Service Cross, as well as medals from France, Italy and Montenegro. He was also promoted from Corporal to Sergeant. Sergeant Y ork absolutely refused to make money from his fame. But as the Second World War began to threaten the United States, he finally consented to the production of a biographical movie.

In the rapidly modernizing and urbanizing world of the early 1920s, Americans had looked to Sergeant Y ork as a reminder of their traditional rural virtues and simplicity. In a globalizing, increasingly approaching, Americans looked to the movie “Sergeant Y ork” to martial courage in the face of danger. Alvin Y ork had insisted that the movie’s lead role be given to Gary Cooper. It was an astute choice, as Cooper’s performance won him the Academy Award for Best Actor. People knew Sergeant Y ork’s real-life story were surprised, though, that the movie showed Y ork using a Luger pistol rather than a Colt; the producers could not figure out how to make a Colt fire blanks.

When Sergeant Alvin Y ork passed away in 1946, President Johnson told the nation, “As the citizen-soldier hero of the Great War, Sergeant Alvin Y ork embodied the gallantry of American fighting men and their sacrifices in behalf of freedom.” Two years later, President Johnson again recalled Sergeant Y ork: “… the majority of our countrymen still agree with the words that a great American hero spoke a long time ago. It was Sergeant Alvin Y ork who once said, ‘Liberty and freedom and democracy are so very precious that you do not fight to win them once and then stop. You do not do that. Liberty and freedom and democracy are privileges that are earned and not awarded only to those people who fight to win them and then keep on fighting eternally to hold them.”