

Sergeant York and World War II

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While Alvin C. York's famous exploit in the Argonne Forest on October 8, 1918 is well known and even the stuff of legend, his role in World War II has essentially faded away. His work in WWII proved far more extensive and is perhaps more significant than what he did in the Great War. Though he returned home and once again embraced pacifism, the Sergeant began anticipating another World War in the late 1930s.

Trouble brewed in the Pacific during the Second Sino-Japanese war, as Japan extended its domination over mainland China. US corporation Standard Oil evacuated its workers and tankers from Nanking in 1937. On December 12, Captain James Hughes, followed orders to escort the tankers down the Yangtze River. Suddenly his ship the *U.S.S. Panay* fell under attack as Japanese planes strafed the ship and dropped bombs. Two American sailors died and several others were wounded in the attack. The day after the *Panay* sank, Nanking fell into the hands of the Japanese after a death toll of 200,000 people. Events in China caught Alvin York's attention. While attending the Golden Gate Exposition in San Francisco, York was asked to comment upon current events. He said, "I think we ought to be careful about all that scrap metal we keep sending to Japan, because it might just come back at us in a different form."

Throughout 1938 and 1939 York warned Americans to prepare war with Japan. Events in Europe seemed less threatening, and until the fall of Poland he said little about war with Nazi Germany. In 1939 Jesse Lasky, an independent producer at Warner Bros., contacted York, about making a movie based on York's World War I heroics. After months of negotiations, York agreed in March of 1940. Through his association with Jesse Lasky and Harry M. Warner, both of whom were Jewish, York took greater interest in the war in Europe.

Because of his association with Jesse Lasky and the Warner Brothers, York became a spokesman for the Fight For Freedom Committee (FFF) which advocated American intervention. That association placed York squarely in the cross hairs of the America First Committee and one of its chief sponsors, Charles Lindbergh. Two of America's greatest living heroes squared off against the other. Lindbergh claimed that Hitler posed no threat to the U.S., but that Winston Churchill was. York saw Hitler and his allies for what they were and urged President Franklin D. Roosevelt to declare war.

FDR initiated first peacetime draft in U.S. history. Tennessee Governor Prentice Cooper created the Tennessee Preparedness Committee, headed by Cookevillian Rutledge Smith. It included Alvin C. York and Cornelia Fort. Their task was to identify key industries that could be converted to wartime production, and work with local municipalities to safeguard public utilities and other services. Governor Cooper established new county draft boards, and in a touch of irony that was lost on no one, he appointed Alvin C. York to head the Fentress County draft.

York began his attack on Charles Lindbergh and America First in a Memorial Day Address at the tomb of the Unknown Soldier with FDR in attendance. York told the audience, "our victory in the last war, we won a lease on liberty, not a deed to it. Now after 23 years, Adolf Hitler tells us that lease is expiring. . ." York urged them to stand up to the Nazi threat.

On 3 July 1941, the day after *Sergeant York* premiered, York spoke to the Tennessee Society of New York. Unlike Lindbergh, who hated crowds, York loved being in the company of people and had become a moving speaker. Openly advocating intervention York cautioned his listeners not to be smug, like Lindbergh, about the recent invasion of Russia:

Twenty long years have gone by since I came home, and yet if you pick up your newspaper today, the same topic occupies the headlines as blazed across

our front pages then. War . . . Russia's record of military success is rivalled [sic] only by Hitler's record for honesty.

I will be sorry if Russia is defeated quickly, for a number of reasons. The first is Hitler must [his emphasis] be stopped. The second is that a long, drawn out war between Russia and Germany would weaken both dictators. The third, and most important reason for my sorrow at a speedy German victory is that it will give fuel to such isolationists and appeasers as Senator Wheeler and ex-Colonel Lindbergh, and ex-President Hoover.

They will burst forth with long, windy statements to the effect that this effort proves that the German Army is the greatest military machine in the history of the world, and that it therefore makes our helping England a little stupid, since no country, no matter how strong, can possibly stand up before the punishment dealt out by the Nazis.

As his speech continued York's primary target became Charles Lindbergh who represented to most Americans the ideology of America First. He drew his verbal knife, shoved it deeply into the popular perceptions of Lindbergh, and twisted it:

Stalin did everything he could to make himself a super-Neville Chamberlain. And before two years of that counterfeit friendship had run its inevitable course, Germany was sending its armed legions across the border to attack its recent strange bedpartner.

Can ex-colonel Lindbergh now say that appeasement hasn't been given every conceivable chance to prove itself? . . . I hope that the former Colonel is not too hurt by what I have said here this afternoon and what I will continue to say on other afternoons and evenings. I hope he understands how I feel, and believe me when I say that I have tried to understand how he feels. I have failed in that, but that may be because of the fact that of all the medals I was fortunate enough to get, none of them came with the personal blessings of Adolf Hitler.

York made it clear to those assembled that he would continue his assault on isolationists in general, and Lindbergh in particular. By mentioning the infamous medal that Goering had presented to the aviator in the name of the Fuhrer, York implied that Lindbergh--a man with a German sounding name--was in fact a Nazi. If Lindbergh was a Nazi, then America First represented a fascistic fifth column working for the Axis powers.

York and Lindbergh both received a flurry of angry letters. Mrs. Norine Crosby of Swartz Creek, Michigan, accused York of betraying Christian values by associating with Jews.

She ended her letter saying, "Dear Mr. York, if you need hospitalization make the ones who look after this give it to you, and I hope success for you." Several others voiced their displeasure with York. Many accused him of treason, cowardice, avarice, and being infected by a Jewish virus.

Most wished him bodily harm. Walter Camp of Trenton, New Jersey wrote:

Well you skunk and ignoramus, you got fooled yourself in the last war, and now for a few dirty dollars that you are getting, you are betraying millions of young men. . . You ought to kiss every step the Hon. Chas. Lindbergh and that Champion of Men, Mr. Nye is making [sic], just to stop others from getting into the same stupid conditions as you are at the present time. It's a shame that such people as you came back, it would have been a blessing if you were shot to pieces. May you break your neck right now as you and others like you are a menace to civilization.

In the midst of the heated debate between the two heroes, interventionist columnist Walter Winchell weighed into the fray. Celebrating York's outspoken criticism of the colonel, Winchell summed up the situation in this way:

Here is a thumbnail portrait of two famous American citizens that tells its own story. . . One is Sergeant York, America's outstanding World War Hero; the other is Charles Lindbergh. York fought in the World War and was ready to sacrifice his life for his country, Lindbergh is ready to sacrifice his country for his life. . . When Lindbergh returned from Europe a hero, he accepted a fat salary for the use of his name on an airline. When York returned from Europe, he received offers totaling more than a million dollars, but he turned them down because he didn't want to commercialize his heroism. . . When York finally accepted a film company's offer to film his life, he took the money to finance building schools in Tennessee. Sergeant York, America's No. 1 hero, is for all out help to England. Lindbergh, whether he realizes it or not, is for all out aid to Hitler. York was decorated with a medal by the American government; Lindbergh by the Nazi. Lindbergh says he is for America first. Sergeant York says it a lot more convincingly when he offers his life once again in the cause of Liberty.

The bombing of Pearl Harbor and the declaration of war against Japan and Nazi Germany, persuaded Americans that Alvin York had been correct after all. He believed passionately in the necessity of the war, and tried to resign from the Fentress County draft board and re-enlist. At fifty-four years of age, overweight, and near-diabetic, Governor Cooper flatly

refused his resignation. The army also turned him down York's request to re-enlist, but realized that he could be of special service to the U.S. military. For the duration of the war, Sergeant York acted as a civilian liaison with the Signal Corps under the honorary rank of colonel.

Colonel York made significant contributions to the allied victory over Nazi Germany. High profile due to the movie *Sergeant York* which won Gary Cooper his only best actor Oscar in 1942, Colonel York traveled the country as the Signal Corps morale officer. He visited every state-side training camp, addressing troops, regaling them with stories, and telling them how much better army life was in the 1940s than it had been in 1917-18. On most occasions, the legendary sharp shooter was asked to demonstrate his shooting skills on the firing range, using both single-shot rifles, Thompson submachine guns and the new M-1 rifle.

The war years found Sergeant York constantly on the road as a roving ambassador for the War Department. He traveled in the company of military leaders, soldiers, public servants and Hollywood Royalty. Among his traveling companions were Carl Sandburg, Greer Garson, Andy Devine, Wendell Willkie, Secretary of the Navy Henry Knox, and General Hap Arnold.

Praising the work of women during the war, he said they deserved a permanent place in public life. He also pushed for use of black troops in combat, saying that failure to do so was agreeing with Hitler's assertion that African Americans were inferior troops. He encouraged citizens to buy war bonds, to tighten their belts and conserve paper, rubber, sugar, meat, and gasoline, and to be vigilant against Quislings in their midst.

In early 1942 York was prevailed upon to allow his name to be used for a daily syndicated newspaper column "Sergeant York Says." Ostensibly the homey homilies were penned by the Sergeant at his home in Pall Mall. In reality the bulk of them were written by York's secretary Arthur Bushing and *Nashville Tennessean* columnist Hugh Walker. "Sergeant

York Says,” ran for roughly two years, ending in 1944.

In addition to his work with the Signal Corps, War Department, the Fentress County Draft Board, and “Sergeant York Says,” York also hosted a weekly radio program entitled “Tennessee Americans.” It aired every Sunday evening at 7:00 p.m. Engineered by Knoxville’s WNOX, the show was broadcast nationally over MBS, and even to some overseas locations. When York was in Fentress County WNOX engineers the program was broadcast from the auditorium at York Institute. The hour-long program featured news, live music, and an interview segment where York carried on a conversation with an important person of the day. It ended with a short speech by York about some pressing issue and encouraged listeners to tune their dials to that same station the next Sunday. On occasions, when York toured military bases, his trip coincided with the Grand Ole Opry’s touring military show “The Camel Caravan.” Sponsored by RJ Reynolds, the Camel Caravan featured a number of Opry performers who sang and joked for the troops. Its headliners were Minnie Pearl and Eddy Arnold, both of whom appeared on “Tennessee Americans.” One of York’s guests was General Douglas MacArthur while visiting his in-laws in Murfreesboro in 1942.

This is but a glimpse of what Tennessee’s most celebrated World War I hero did, during the war. His efforts inspired thousands of people and he lived by example. He suffered the same privations that other citizens endured due to rationing, black outs, and censorship. He also had three sons of military age, two of whom served in the U.S. army.