



Sergeant York: An American Hero

David Lee

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Alvin C. York went out on a routine patrol an ordinary, unknown American doughboy of the First World War. He came back from no-man's-land a hero. In a brief encounter on October 8, 1918, during the Argonne offensive, York had killed 25 German soldiers and, almost singlehandedly, effected the capture of 132 others. Returning to the United States the following spring, he received a tumultuous public welcome and a flood of offers from businessmen eager to capitalize on his acclaimed feat. But York, true to his character, went quietly back to his home in the Tennessee mountains, where he spent the remainder of his life working to bring schools and other services to those remote valleys where his neighbors lived.

In this definitive biography, David D. Lee has firmly established the simple facts of Alvin York's life, distinguishing them from the myths which have grown up around the man. He has reexamined the sometimes conflicting accounts of the famous exploit, finding in his research a hitherto unknown report of the skirmish from German military archives. Lee goes beyond that single wartime episode, however, to consider its consequences on York's later life?his efforts, not always successful, to better his mountain community; his involvement in making a motion picture of his life; his difficulties with money and taxes. But Sergeant York is better known as a symbol than as an individual, and in this study Lee connects the man and his life to an American heroic ideal. With his rural background, his refusal to take commercial advantage of his fame, and his simple piety, Alvin York exemplified the traditional values of an agrarian America that was in his own day already receding into the past. He claimed a special place in the hearts of his countrymen, Lee concludes, because his life seemed to show that the virtues of the common man continued to be a vital part of American society.

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