

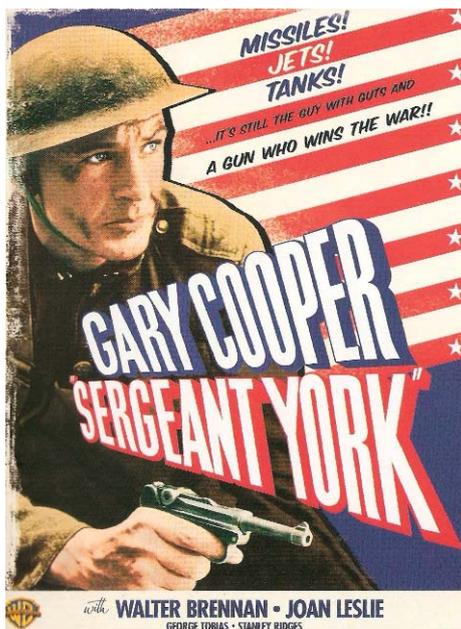
Hot on the York Trail?

Introduction

Châtel-Chéhéry – a tranquil village of less than 150 inhabitants in the Argonne region of northern France. The local château bears the scars of artillery fire from 1918; its garden offers a panoramic view of the valley of the Meuse. Stretching out more or less parallel to that valley, but on the other side of the village, is a low range of hills, covered in a fairytale-like forest of birch and beech.

That forest, for many Americans, is sacred ground. It was here, on 8 October 1918, that Alvin York of Tennessee performed the deeds that would make him the most-decorated American soldier of the Great War. He is credited with having single-handedly killed twenty-five German soldiers and taking 132 prisoners. His actions that day made York a hero of unparalleled status. And in 1941 his popularity was boosted even further with the appearance of the movie *Sergeant York*, starring Gary Cooper, who won an Oscar for his performance in the title role.

The exact location of York's heroics was never accurately documented. But a research team led by Lieutenant Colonel Douglas Mastriano, an American intelligence officer stationed in Germany, claims now to have found the spot. The crowning glory of Mastriano's work was the unveiling, on Saturday, 4 October 2008, of a monument in the woods behind Châtel-Chéhéry. He is, the officer says, 100 per cent certain that his team has found the 'York spot'. 'The debate is over.' But others have their doubts and are sceptical about his research methods. 'They have destroyed a part of their own historical heritage.'



Poster for the *Sergeant York* movie.

German archives

Thirty years ago it was the movie that put Douglas Mastriano on the trail of Alvin York. 'Later I became a historian and taught military history. It frustrated me to find that, from a military point of view, there was no



Post-war press photograph of Alvin C. York (1887 – 1964). Picture from the George Grantham Bain collection, Library of Congress.

convincing description of York's story. So I began combing the American archives.'

In 2002 he was transferred to Germany. There the intelligence officer had the opportunity to dig through the German archives as well. In that same year he also paid his first visit to the Argonne region. His team, the 'Sergeant York Discovery Expedition (SYDE)', was put together four years later. Intensive searches of the former battlefield brought to light bullets, cartridge cases, buttons, buckles and much more. First the lay of the land was analysed. Did the eyewitness reports jibe with the characteristics of the terrain itself? What would be the logical location, from a military point of view, for the York Spot? These and many other questions received an answer in a report published in January 2007.

Mastriano's ace in the hole? The German archives. The York Spot had to be located along the border between two sections of the front, there where the 120th and 125th Württembergische Landwehr regiments had

their encampments that day. 'York, after all, captured soldiers from both of those regiments.' As a coup de grace, the SYDE went on to find twenty-one cartridges that must have come from the Colt .45 belonging to York himself, who was known to have fired precisely that many bullets from his automatic pistol. Their conclusion: the search was over. Mastriano and his team had finally found the spot where it all happened.

Collar insignia

Meanwhile, however, a second group of researchers had gone to work as well. The leader of this 'Sergeant York Project' is Dr. Thomas Nolan, geographer and head of the Laboratory for Spatial Technology at the University of Middle Tennessee. His specialty is the application of Geographical Information Systems (GIS) to military history. 'As a Tennessean I had, of course, always been fascinated by York. And his story was also an interesting case for the application of GIS.'

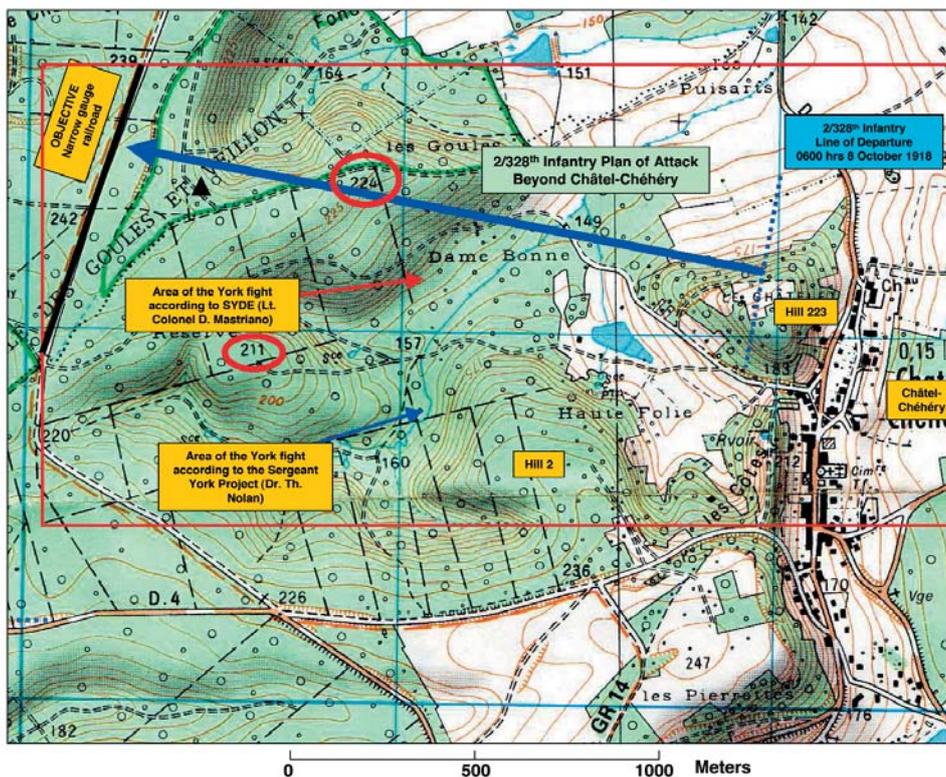
Nolan made a reconstruction of the relevant section of the Argonne as it must have looked at the time, and projected that onto today's landscape. That, in combination with historical and archaeological research, was supposed to answer the question of where York performed his memorable deeds. Four months after the SYDE report came out, Nolan presented his conclusions in a dissertation. The York Spot, the geographer said, was somewhere else. 'Mastriano based his work on the German archives, but they're not all that reliable. The Germans had just pulled out of Châtel-Chéhéry and were retreating in disorderly fashion; they couldn't really pinpoint their exact location.' Let alone document that position clearly in their archives.

Nolan looked instead for a likely spot based on American sources. On that same October day in 1918, six of York's comrades were killed. They were buried at - or close to - where the actual firefight took place. After the war their bodies were transferred to a permanent cemetery, but the geographical



Bundesarchiv, Bild 104-0176

Troops and material transport with the German narrow gauge 'Argonnenbahn' in 1915. German Federal Archive.



[Based upon IGN - Institut Geographique National 1:25,000 Carte Topographique, Serie Bleue, Number: 3012 E]

8 October 1918: at 0600 the 2nd Battalion of the 328th Infantry Regiment (82nd 'All American' Division) attacks the German positions west from Hill 223, near Châtel-Chéhéry. The ultimate objective of the attack is a narrow gauge railroad, a major German supply line in the Argonne woods. The left wing of the attack is carried out by G Company. 'Early in the attack of this battalion, the progress of G Company was seriously impeded by heavy machine gun fire from a hill directly southwest across the valley from Hill 223 (...). A force of four non-commissioned officers and thirteen privates was sent from the left support platoon of G Company to encircle the hill and silence the enemy guns. This detachment, under Acting Sergeant Early, encircled the hill from the southeast (...) and descended to the wooded ravine on the west side of the hill.' The patrol, with in its midst Corporal York, manages to take a large group of German soldiers by surprise. 'German machine gunners on the hillside, however, quickly reversed their guns and poured a hail of bullets into the bottom of the ravine, killing six and wounding three of the American detachment.' York, an excellent marksman, shoots back and kills several of the enemy's soldiers until 'German morale gave way entirely and the battalion commander surrendered his command.' York and his fellow infantrymen lead the prisoners out of the forest. 'On his way back over the hill he picked up a considerable number of additional prisoners from the north and northeast slopes of the hill.' Quoted from *Official History of 82nd Division American Expeditionary Forces* (Indianapolis 1919), pp 59-61. The encircled hill is Hill 2.

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26 September 1918: U.S. troops advancing with Renault FT-17 tanks on the first day of the Meuse-Argonne offensive. U.S. National Archives and Records Administration.

coordinates of the original graves were recorded. There, at that very spot, Nolan's team found a bronze collar insignia with the inscription '328 G' – proof that they were hot on the trail. York, after all, had served with 'G' Company of the 328th Infantry Regiment. Nolan is not impressed by the SYDE's finds. 'The ground there is peppered with artefacts.'

The geographer accuses Mastriano of a lack of professionalism. 'It's absurd to say that you're a hundred percent sure of yourself. A scientist may never claim to know the absolute truth.' Later he added: 'Our team was the only one with a permit for archaeological research. In fact, you could say that Mastriano's expedition was illegal.' What's more, he notes, a plot of forest was cut down to accommodate the monument. 'That has caused irreparable damage to the site.'

In December of 2007, *Army History*, the journal of the US Army Center of Military History, asked Nolan to submit an article. Along with a contribution from Mastriano it would appear in the journal's autumn edition. 'They backed out, though, and I have no idea why. It's never been my goal to attract a lot of publicity; I'm primarily interested in scientific research. But now I have no forum.'

Silly

Douglas Mastriano says it is 'arrogant' of his rival to make claims about the German archive material. 'He's never seen those archives. What's more, his team didn't even include any military experts. And the Germans did not withdraw in a panic, they were actually planning a counter offensive.' When asked, Nolan admits that, due to a lack

of time and funding, he never actually did visit the German archives.

Mastriano has little patience with the claim that the SYDE destroyed its own research site. The place where the monument now stands, he says, was investigated painstakingly beforehand, by hand. 'While the other team actually used a backhoe!'

But what about the accusation that he operated without a permit? 'That's silly,' is the officer's reaction. 'A desperate statement by a desperate man. I asked for and received permission from everyone who mattered: the local mayor and the gendarmerie. Now that they've lost the debate, they've decided to switch to an ad hominem attack.' In his view, the best proof that he played by the rules – and that his version of the story has been accepted as the only correct one – is the very York Trail he had laid out at Châtel-Chéhéry. A walking path several kilometers long, following in the footsteps of Alvin York. 'The proof is in the pudding. If there had been any doubt, the French would not have allowed that.'

Mastriano stresses that not only the local authorities, but also the American and French armies endorse his findings, as does the Center of Military History – 'the Army's last word in history.' The suggestion that, under the circumstances, his own institute might not be the most impartial observer is one he dismisses irritably. 'Your supposition is utterly ridiculous.' He suggests that we take a good look at the independent endorsements of his findings on the SYDE website. But, at the time of writing, there was still not a single independent, scientific expression of support to be found there. Not from the French army, either. True enough, the site does include the copy of a letter in French. But that letter endorses nothing. It is merely an internal memo concerning Mastriano's request to be allowed to build the trail.

Site ruined

Yves Desfossés has his offices in Châlons-en-Champagne, the capital of the French region of Champagne-Ardenne. Desfossés is the regional archaeological curator, in the service of the Ministry of Culture and Communication. Without a permit from Desfossés, no metal detector may be used within his district – including the Argonne. He is quite adamant about that: it is across his desk that all permit applications must pass. Not that of the local mayor, and not that of the police.

Thomas Nolan requested just such a permit and received it. But, as it turned out, the competing SYDE team had already conducted its search in the Argonne – operating on its own authorisation. Desfossés had, in fact, never heard of Mastriano at the time. In December 2006 he finally spoke to the lieutenant-colonel. 'His methodology appeared not to be particularly accurate. At that point he asked me for a permit for further research, but I turned him down.' Desfossés refuses to speak of a criminal offence. 'I think Mastriano simply didn't know that a permit was needed. And, by the way, I suspect that afterwards he went on with his digs anyway.'

The curator is surprised to hear that the SYDE report mentions him as one of the



Graves of four men from York's unit, buried close to where they had fallen. Picture taken on 7 February 1919. U.S. National Archives and Records Administration.



Homage to York by Lt. Colonel Mastriano and his Sergeant York Discovery Expedition (SYDE), close to the spot where they claim the York fight took place. Picture taken by author in May 2008.

'valuable partners/friends who made the discovery possible.' 'That's simply not true. I met Mastriano only once, and I told him at the time that I did not agree with his methods.' And why was that? 'Mastriano was already convinced that he had found the exact spot. That's where he looked, and that is also where he found those twenty-one cartridges. Of course, that is much too obvious. Clearly it was not an objective investigation. Nolan took a scientific approach. And at the spots where his team worked, one will still be able to carry out archaeological research in the future, while Mastriano ruined his research site.'

But what does he think about the backhoe? 'Did you see the photograph of that machine in Nolan's thesis? I'm one of the people standing beside it. Those excavations were, in fact, carried out under my auspices.' At the time, Nolan had been looking for the original graves of York's comrades. The coordinates, after all, were public knowledge. I was also curious to find out whether something like that could still be traced, ninety years after the fact.' Because metal detectors are effective only to a depth of about 30 centimeters, the backhoe was used to scrape the soil away layer by layer. That, the curator says, was not a particularly risky business. Archaeology, by definition, disrupts the soil. 'But a machine does so absolutely no more than do excavations by hand.' The collar insignia was found in this very way, in combination with a metal detector. The graves, however, were not. As one can read in Nolan's thesis.

Desfossés is a bit puzzled about all the fuss surrounding the York Spot. But then again: 'Mastriano is a soldier. I believe the American military is in need of heroes, especially in light of the fact that the war in Iraq is not going quite the way they had hoped.' Otherwise, however, Yves Desfossés could really care less. Alvin York was an American, not a Frenchman. 'And if the members of the SYDE fail to see that they have destroyed a part of their own historical heritage, then that, of course, is their problem.'

For the time being, Desfossés has had enough of the whole affair. Using current archaeological methods, he feels, the York Spot cannot be pinpointed. Despite the care with which he went to work even Nolan was unable to locate the graves satisfactorily. The curator has therefore introduced a ban – at least temporarily – on further excavations, to safeguard any new finds for future research.

Meanwhile, the York Trail has been laid out. Proof positive, according to Douglas Mastriano, that the official French agencies endorse the SYDE's findings. Yves Desfossés, however, is not impressed. If there was anything like an official endorsement it did not come from his ministry. 'At most from the mayor of a small village, who must of course be thrilled by the prospect of all those American tourists.'

But even Alain Rickal, mayor of Châtel-Chéhéry, is unwilling to make a statement about the precise location of the York Spot.

Yes, his municipality did allow Mastriano to build the trail. But is that 'the proof of the pudding'? In fact, Rickal says he is not interested in the final conclusion to the whole discussion. 'That is strictly between the two teams. I have no idea who is right.'

Overlooked

Douglas Mastriano did indeed continue to use a metal detector. In July 2008 he was assisted in that by Brad Posey, a retired US Army staff sergeant. Posey is a fervent amateur archaeologist of long standing who lives, like Lieutenant Colonel Mastriano, in Germany. They came into contact through several auctions of Great War equipment and uniforms on an online auction site and the officer invited Posey to help search in the Argonne.

At first Posey found the Lieutenant-Colonel's report convincing, but began having doubts when new finds suddenly appeared at the SYDE's York Spot. 'We uncovered a lot of artefacts they had missed, and some directly at the York Spot, like another .45 cartridge case and a fired .45 bullet. The count of .45 casings is now over the twenty-one he states in his report.' Posey points out that Mastriano has not updated his report, nor does he mention other important artefacts that were found at the York Spot and in the surrounding area. 'In his report he only mentions and illustrates those artefacts that support his claim.'

Back home, Posey began studying the American sources, such as the Official History of the 82nd Division (York's unit), published in 1919. On the basis of that material he concluded that the York Spot must be in the valley southeast of where Mastriano was searching. But there was more: 'It seemed that Lieutenant Colonel Mastriano totally ignored all of the US accounts of the action, with the exceptions of a few phrases that fit his version of the story.' The description given by Mastriano, Posey explains, states that York's gunfight took place on an eastern-facing slope and that York attacked the German positions from the front. All the



Dr Nolan's team looking for burial sites with backhoe. Picture taken by Jim Deppen.

American sources, however, indicate that the fight actually took place on a western-facing slope, behind German lines. No mention of that, however, is found in the SYDE report.

The sergeant also emphasises that, in his view, the SYDE has provided no concrete indications as to the exact configuration of the German regimental lines – the crucial bit of evidence, according to Mastriano. ‘Their report,’ Posey says, ‘does indeed include a long and impressive list of the German archives consulted, but that’s all. Have you seen a proper annotation anywhere?’

Once again, to those German files. Is that perhaps where the key to the mystery lies? To put an end to the controversy, Posey has now begun his own, independent study of the archives.

The last word

Meanwhile, Douglas Mastriano is no longer available for comment and refuses to respond to Posey’s criticisms. The telephone connection is broken, emails remain unanswered.

There is, therefore, only one course of action open to us: to contact the US Army Center of Military History (CMH). Historian Dr. Jeffrey Clarke, the Center’s director, once wrote a letter expressing his admiration for the ‘convincing and well-crafted record of the SYDE’s efforts and findings.’ That letter can be found on the SYDE website. Perhaps the CMH – ‘the Army’s last word in history’ in Mastriano’s words – can then explain the discrepancies hit upon by Brad Posey?

Several years ago, Lieutenant Colonel Mastriano told Dr. Clarke about his plans to look for the York Spot. ‘He asked me for official support from the CMH, to demonstrate that he was not some troublemaker, but a person engaged in serious research.’ Clarke says he would provide such endorsement to anyone working in a scientific fashion. The only problem is: ‘There’s no way to judge if the findings are correct. From the United States, that’s not possible either.’

An interesting comment from someone



7 February 1919: York on the former battlefield near Châtel-Chéhéry during an army investigation into the 8 October 1918 action. George Grantham Bain collection.

whose words have been quoted as evidence in favour of the SYDE’s conclusions. But had he actually read the report at the time? ‘Probably not,’ is his matter-of-fact reply. ‘I’m not interested that much.’ As manager of a large institute, he explains, he has too many other things on his mind.

Why then did he allow Mastriano to use his letter on the SYDE website? Dr. Clarke says he is unaware of any such use. ‘He did what he wanted to do. Maybe I made a mistake. There’s no real way to find the exact spot.’ That letter, he adds, cannot be considered evidence either, seeing as the CMH was not present during the fieldwork. And describing

research conclusions in terms of ‘100% accuracy’, as the SYDE has, is something he would never venture to do.

The director also knows nothing about the problems surrounding Army History, the magazine published by his institute that had planned to run contributions from both Thomas Nolan and Douglas Mastriano, but later backed out. He refers us instead to managing editor Dr. Charles Hendricks.

At first Hendricks is reluctant, and willing to comment only after a certain amount of urging. The crux of the matter, he says, is that Army History had run articles about the search for the York Spot before, and that there were so many other things to report about. That would be completely understandable, were it not for the fact that Nolan and Mastriano were actually approached and asked to write articles. Nolan says he does not understand why his article was never run. What happened to make Army History change its mind about publication? Dr. Hendricks, however, prefers not to comment.

An editor who veils himself in a cloak of silence, and a director who writes a letter commending a report whose conclusions he considers beforehand to be impossible. The CMH as ‘the Army’s last word in history’? Dr. Clarke: ‘That would be nice, if the Center of Military History had the last word about anything.’

Homage

Accusations back and forth. One group of researchers whose scientific expertise is up for discussion. A second group who could have avoided a lot of problems if it had looked through the German archive material itself. Two reports, two different York Spots. Separated by a couple of hundred meters of French soil. That may seem piddling when compared with a front hundreds of kilometers long and a war that cost millions of lives. But not when one realises how lightly some of the players have dealt with the story of a national hero. Not when scientific principles are ignored and critical questions avoided.

On Saturday, 4 October 2008, Châtel-Chéhéry was the site of a tribute to Alvin York. After a memorial gathering in the village, the York Trail was officially opened. The highpoint of the day was the unveiling of the monument at the end of that trail: an orientation table with texts in English, French and German, paying homage to the sharpshooter from Tennessee. The guests included one of York’s sons and a grandson. But were they led to the wrong spot? One thing is certain. It would be premature to assume that the debate is over. The pudding has not been proven; at best, only a few bites have been taken...

Sergeant York Discovery Expedition (SYDE): <http://www.sgtyorkdiscovery.com>
Sergeant York Project: <http://sergeantYorkproject.com>

Stephan van Meulebrouck

Stephan van Meulebrouck is a Dutch historian and freelance journalist. His original Dutch-language article has been rendered into English by a prizewinning American translator, Sam Garrett, who has lived in Europe for many years.



Dead 328th Infantry Regiment soldiers (not those from York’s patrol) awaiting burial. Châtel-Chéhéry cemetery, 8 October 1918. U.S. National Archives and Records Administration.