

Research

Finding Sergeant York

By James B. Legg

In April 2009, I participated in the third and latest field season of the Sergeant York Project in the Argonne Forest in northern France. I have often visited the Western Front, but have never had the opportunity to work there. As a battlefield archaeologist and a serious student of the Great War, I was very pleased that I could finally combine those interests in a field project.

Dr. Thomas Nolan, a historical geographer at Middle Tennessee State University, created the Sergeant York Project. His goal was to locate and interpret the particular site of Alvin York's Medal of Honor action, on October 8, 1918 (see *Legend of Sergeant York*, page 22). Nolan used a combination of historical research, his GIS expertise, and archaeology to convincingly demonstrate the location. Field seasons in March and November 2006, yielded a distribution of artifacts that clearly match the details of

the York action. The site is in a part of the Argonne Forest that was not otherwise fought over, allowing a degree of archaeological clarity that would be difficult or impossible to find in most areas of the Western Front. The York project was the topic of Nolan's Texas State University dissertation submitted in 2007 (see *Further Reading*, p. 21).

By mid-2008, controversy was brewing. A second "York location" project claimed an entirely different site, some 500 meters north of Nolan's site (see *Further Reading*, p. 21). The other project was clearly *not* in the correct location, but their findings received credulous press coverage. They maintained an attractive and convincing web site, and they ultimately erected a monument and prepared a walking trail on the non-site!



Fig. 2: Tom Nolan (left) and Brad Posey with a freshly recovered German mess kit. (Photo by James Legg)

Brad Posey, an American military historian and expert metal detector technician living in Germany, convinced Tom Nolan that an additional field season might add weight to his under-publicized case. Posey had examined the methods and claims of both projects, and he conducted extensive historical research in both U. S. and German archives, including much material that neither York project had utilized. Nolan applied for a new archaeological permit, and after considerable delay in scheduling, he set the dates for his third field season as April 7-17, 2009. I was invited to participate as the project "battlefield archaeologist," although that was essentially what everyone would be doing. I had seen both sites and had studied the historical record, and I knew I wanted to be involved.

I flew into the Frankfurt airport on the morning of April 6, 2009, and was met by my old friend Brad Posey, whose car was heavily laden with field gear and supplies. A few hours later we were on the Meuse-Argonne battlefield, and we checked into a large rental house that Tom Nolan had reserved in the village of Fleville, a few kilometers east of the York site. The project team that assembled there included individuals from the U.S., Germany, France, Britain, and the Netherlands. Project oversight and heavy equipment were provided by Yves DesFossés the regional archaeologist



Fig 1: A view from near the village of Chatel-Chéhéry, southwest toward the Argonne Forest. The York action took place in the valley between the two wooded ridges. The scene of the 328th Infantry attack is out of the picture to the right. (Photo by James Legg)

for Champagne-Ardenne. Yves is a Celtic specialist who has developed a strong interest in Great War archaeology (see *Further Reading*, p. 21).

We began work on the morning of April 7, 2009, and worked through the next 11 days with lab work and analysis in the evenings. There were two major goals. First, we wanted to repeat the metal detector survey of the site and expand its boundaries. While he had recorded hundreds of artifacts, Tom Nolan was concerned that the metal detecting in the first two brief seasons was too hurried and unsystematic, and that much material had been overlooked (he was correct). Second, we wanted to locate evidence of the temporary burials of the six Americans of York's patrol who were killed during the action. Five of the six burials were reasonably located in U. S. graves registration records, and the earlier metal detecting had found artifacts probably related to the sixth individual. The grave search would involve metal detecting, hand excavation, and mechanical stripping.

The intensive metal detector coverage continued throughout the project, with as many as five experienced detector operators working at a time. We strived for 100%, systematic coverage within our search areas, and also conducted

reconnaissance searches of adjacent landforms. Each artifact was bagged and marked with a provenience number, and it was then collected and replaced with a pin flag bearing the same number. The pin flag locations were later recorded using a survey-grade GPS unit—or at least that was the intention. The narrow valley where the York action took place was defined by very steep hillsides covered with hardwood forest. Tom Nolan knew from previous experience that he would have difficulty recording hundreds of long, reliable GPS readings in such terrain, and he had arranged with a French contractor to provide relay equipment that would solve the problem. There was some sort of compatibility problem with this solution, however, and we had to resort to primitive technology. We set a series of datum stakes across the site, which were recorded with hard-won GPS readings, and then mapped dozens of artifacts from each stake using compass and tape.

The collection derived from the metal detecting was huge, and like the 2006 collections, its distribution fit remarkably well with the events of October 8, 1918. Through most of the valley, and on the hill slope to the north, there was



Fig. 4: French Great War archaeologist Yves DesFossés pondering some mechanical stripping. (Photo by James Legg)

very little WWI material, reflecting the fact that there was no other combat in the immediate vicinity. In the area where we think the German prisoners were clustered, there was a well-defined mass of German material including hundreds of unfired 7.92mm rifle cartridges, stick grenades, gas mask components, mess equipment, entrenching tools, personal items, etc. This was consistent with the POWs abandoning their weapons and equipment, and it suggested the extent of the loose perimeter formed by their outnumbered American captors. The postulated American perimeter included a scatter of impacted German rifle/machinegun bullets, as well as very strong evidence for all of the temporary American burials. Up the steep, wooded slope to the east of the POW cluster, we found abundant evidence for the other German force, the machine gunners and riflemen who were engaged and ultimately defeated by Alvin York. Finally, at the base of the slope, between the German POWs and the upslope Germans who put up a fight, we found a small scatter of U. S. .45 ACP pistol and .30'06 rifle cartridge cases



Fig. 3: James Legg recovering German rifle cartridges. (Photo courtesy of James Legg)



Fig. 5: The artifact lab/dining room in our house in Fleville. (Photo by James Legg)

that were probably fired by Alvin York.

The first of the probable grave locations we examined is likely that of Corporal Murray Savage, a friend of Alvin York, whom York saw riddled with machinegun bullets. His remains were removed in 1921. A 1919 photo shows Savage's field grave cut into the base of a slope, and covered with equipment including his rifle, cartridge belt, and canteen cover. In 2006, metal detecting located artifacts including the remains of a U. S. cartridge belt and 70 unfired .30'06 cartridges, canteen cover hardware, and a U. S. helmet at such a location, very near where we think York was positioned during the action. I excavated a 1 X 2-meter unit at this spot in the hope of finding some evidence of the grave pit. I found additional web gear hardware, U. S. helmet liner parts, and the sole of a U. S. hobnailed shoe, but no indication of a soil feature. Yves DesFossés then directed the stripping of a larger area using a backhoe, still without success. We agreed that the color and character of the soil were such

that a shallow, backfilled excavation might be difficult or impossible to detect. Not far from the probable Savage grave, we found an American pocket watch—the opening of the watchcase that evening was attended with much excitement, but it was,



Fig. 6: Artifact processing—these German artifacts include cartridges, gas mask parts, stick grenades, and a shovel. (Photo by James Legg)

alas, not engraved.

Corporal Savage's grave was incorrectly plotted in the graves registration records, which placed it

nowhere near either "York location," yet we know that he fell by York and was buried there. The other two grave locations appear to have been accurately plotted, including a row of four burials (Privates Dymowski, Swanson, Wareing, and Weiler), and the isolated grave of Private Wine. Both localities are on the opposite (west) side of the American perimeter around the POWs, on the west side of the creek. The plotted vicinity of the four-man grave (removed in 1919) yielded a well-defined cluster of U. S. artifacts in both 2006 and 2009. These included a helmet, web equipment hardware, unfired rifle ammunition, mess utensils, a pocketknife, an opened bandage can, a uniform button, and a collar insignia for "G" Company, 328th Infantry Regiment. A 1919 photo of the four graves includes distant terrain details of the west slope of the valley, and these match the view from the location of the U. S. artifact cluster (the photo also shows that at least three

of the graves are marked with helmets in addition to crosses). A shallow depression is readily apparent at the probable grave location. Unfortunately, a large tree is centered in the depression, and with the limited time available we did not undertake the difficult hand excavation that would have been required to investigate it. Yves DesFossés stripped the topsoil from several trenches around the depression, but we detected no grave feature. Private Wine's solitary grave was not photographed, but its location is well described in the records, and when Wine was removed in 1921, its depth was given as one foot. At approximately the plotted location of Wine's grave, metal detecting yielded a U.S. mess knife and spoon, the knife marked "G/328," in a cluster of small trees. Subsequent mechanical stripping by Yves DesFossés uncovered the missing fork from the set, as well as portions of a U. S. helmet liner.

Given the tree cover and the depth of the original grave, it is not surprising that we did not detect a grave stain.

While the results of the various grave investigations were not as clear cut as we had hoped, I am firmly convinced that we have located the three documented burial sites. I should emphasize that the U. S. artifacts discussed in this context are not “cherry-picked” from a broad scatter of American material. With the exception of ammunition specimens, these “grave”

landscape and the archaeological data.

Acknowledgements

I agreed to participate in the 2009 York project as a volunteer, at my own expense, but in the end, my costs were substantially covered by the contributions or considerations of Charlie Cobb, Stan South, Rebecca Barrera, Brad Posey, Birgit Anderson, Michael Kelly, and Tom Nolan. All are warmly thanked.

currently undergoing an overdue update and expansion. Michael Kelly's *Sergeant York of the Argonne Tour Guide* (Ennogra Forest Publications, 2008) is a useful field guide to the York site and numerous other Meuse-Argonne locations. Michael is a British Western Front historian and a professional battlefield guide who has supported and participated in both the 2006 and 2009 York field projects. David Lee's *Sergeant York: An American Hero* (University Press of Kentucky, 1985) is



Fig. 7: The site of Alvin York's action—a view to the northeast from the creek in the middle of the valley. The German prisoners were gathered in the foreground; York was located at the base of the slope, firing uphill. The site was much more overgrown in 1918. (Photo by James Legg)

artifacts comprise the American collection, and they are indeed clustered in three tight locations. Those locations fit well with the historical narrative of the York action, with the pattern of the general artifact distribution, and, in two cases, with the locations recorded in 1919 and 1921. After some 32 years of working in historical archaeology, I am accustomed to seeing, at best, an ambiguous agreement between the historical record and the archaeological evidence on a site. In this case, the very detailed and well-supported participant narratives of the York action fit astonishingly well with the current

Further Reading...

Tom Nolan's 2007 dissertation, "*Battlefield Landscapes: Geographic Information Science as a Method of Integrating History and Archaeology for Battlefield Interpretation*" is available online at <http://ecommons.txstate.edu/geogtad/5/>. Until the 2009 field work and additional historical research are reflected in a new report, this is the best single source for the site, its history, and its archaeology. Details will change, but the original work is basically sound. The website for the Sergeant York Project is at <http://www.sergeantyorkproject.com>. The site is

a good scholarly biography of Alvin York and his legend. Lee's map of the York action is inaccurate, however. Edward Lengel's *To Conquer Hell: The Meuse-Argonne, 1918* (Henry Holt and Co., 2008) is a long-awaited full narrative of the near-fiasco that was America's greatest battle before Normandy in 1944. This is one of the best military histories I have read. French archaeologists Yves DesFossés, Alain Jaques, and Gilles Prilaux have written a heavily illustrated survey of the new field of Western Front archaeology, published in English as *Great War Archaeology* (INRAP, Editions Ouest France, 2009). This remarkable book includes a discussion of the 2006 York field work. Finally, it should be obvious that I am entirely convinced of the correctness of the York locality that I worked on. In the interest

of fairness, however, I will record that the website and online report of the “other” York project can be found at <http://www.sgttyorkdiscovery.com/>. This can be convincing material for the uninitiated. Be sure to contrast it with a careful reading of Tom Nolan's dissertation. It is *my opinion* that the “other” project was well intentioned, but amounted to an unsystematic, unprovenanced, and unauthorized relic hunt on the battlefield of the main 328th attack on October 8, 1918, (where, of course, there were thousands of American and German artifacts).

The Legend of Sergeant York

By James B. Legg

Corporal Alvin York began the morning of October 8, 1918, as a fairly ordinary draftee soldier in "G" Company, 328th Infantry Regiment, 82nd Division, American Expeditionary Force. He was a humble, born-again Christian, farmer, and hunter from the Tennessee mountains, a remarkably good shot, and a one-time conscientious objector. By the afternoon of October 8, he was well on his way into the realm of warrior legend.

York's unit was engaged in the great Meuse-Argonne Offensive, the largest and final American offensive of the war. The Meuse-Argonne lasted from September 26, 1918 until the end of the war on November 11. Approximately 1.2 million Americans participated, of whom about 27,000 were killed and 96,000 were wounded, gassed or otherwise disabled. The left flank of the offensive faced German defenses in the Argonne Forest, a dense, dark woodland covering a range of steep hills with narrow valleys. On October 8 the 328th Infantry Regiment of the 82nd attacked westward, over open ground, toward the eastern edge of the Argonne Forest. The German defenders held high ground inside the forest both straight ahead (west), and to the left flank (south) of the 328th attack. Numerous German machineguns firing from both directions inflicted heavy casualties on the Americans, and the attackers were pinned down several hundred meters short of the forest. A patrol of men from "G" Company was quickly organized and tasked with neutralizing the machineguns firing from a wooded ridge to the south. The patrol was commanded by Sergeant Bernard Early, and totaled 17 men, including Alvin York. Early led his men to the rear, away from the attack, and then turned south and west. They managed to infiltrate into the Argonne Forest at a point that was not defended by the Germans, and they proceeded deep into the German rear,

intending to attack the machineguns from behind. Early's patrol climbed down a steep slope into a narrow, overgrown valley bisected by a small creek; the valley pointed north, toward the 328th attack. Moving up the valley toward the sound of the German machineguns, the Americans suddenly encountered a group of several dozen Germans resting and eating breakfast between the creek and the base of the eastern slope. The Germans were completely surprised and quickly surrendered, and Early arranged his outnumbered men to form a perimeter around the POWs. Suddenly a heavy fire opened from additional Germans positioned up on the eastern slope—six



Sergeant Alvin York in 1919. (U. S. Army photo)

Americans were killed, three others were wounded, including Early. The survivors were pinned down in the valley, along with their prisoners.

Corporal Alvin York was now in command of the remains of the Early patrol, but he did his own fighting. From his position between the POWs and the enemy force on the hillside above him, York began shooting individual Germans

in the head with his rifle, whenever they attempted to take aim at himself or other Americans. While York was heavily outgunned, the Germans were actually in a difficult position, as York's location at the base of the steep slope required them to expose themselves in order to fire effectively. They were not able to simply blaze away with rifles and machineguns in York's general direction, as he was positioned in front of a large mass of prone POWs. Recognizing the problem, a German officer led five men in a rush to kill York while he was reloading his rifle. York shot all six Germans with his .45 automatic pistol. Ultimately, the surviving Germans on the slope joined the POWs in the valley. York organized the prisoners into a column and marched them out, capturing still more groups before he reached friendly positions. The

official prisoner total was 132, and York was credited with killing 25 Germans. The 328th attack, meanwhile, was successful.

York was promoted to Sergeant, but much more was to come. An official investigation of the action in the valley led to a Medal of Honor and a blaze of publicity in 1919. "Sergeant York" was a national hero and a household name in the years after the Great War. In 1941, Warner Brothers released "Sergeant York," starring Gary Cooper, a popular patriotic morality tale with only tenuous connections to the facts. The movie revived York's fame, and he was still well known

among Americans when he died in 1964. Like the Great War itself, Alvin York has since begun the long slide into oblivion, forgotten or only vaguely recognized by most Americans today. His legend, at least, was one well-grounded in reality. He was real, and he really did what they say he did in that remote ravine in the Argonne Forest.