Voiceover: This program is sponsored by the United States World War I Centennial Commission.
(Theme music)
Voiceover: The following is a production of the Pritzker Military Museum and Library. Bringing citizens and citizen soldiers together through the exploration of military history, topics, and current affairs. This is Pritzker Military Presents.
Clarke: Welcome to Pritzker Military Presents with historian, author, and US Army colonel, Douglas V. Mastriano. I'm your host Ken Clarke, and this program is coming to your from the Pritzker Military Museum and Library in downtown Chicago and is sponsored by the United States World War I Centennial Commission. This program and more than four hundred others covering a full range of military topics is available on demand at PritzkerMilitary.org.
Sergeant Alvin York, a devout Christian, conscientious objector, and reluctant hero of World War I is among the most famous and celebrated soldiers in American history. Known to generations through Gary Cooper's Academy Award winning portrayal in the 1941 film Sergeant York, he is credited with capturing 132 German soldiers on October 8, 1918 in the Meuse-Argonne region of France, a deed for which he was awarded a Medal of Honor. But in spite of his decorations and perhaps because his actions were so glorified by the media at war's end, York's legacy is complicated, with historians still debating the facts and searching for evidence nearly a century later. In his debut book, the Colby Award winning Alvin York: A New Biography of the Hero of the Argonne, Colonel Mastriano draws from extensive research and innovative new forensic evidence of the battle site to sort fact from fiction. The first full-length biography of York in decades, the book includes a meticulous examination of York's youth in the hills of east Tennessee, his service in the Great War, and a groundbreaking scientific reconstruction of York's famous battle. Colonel Mastriano is a military historian and faculty instructor at the US Army War College and is cofounder of the Sergeant York Discovery Expedition responsible for establishing the Sergeant York Historic Trail and Monument in France. Commissioned in 1986 Mastriano has served in tactical, operational, and strategic assignments at the Pentagon and with the 3rd Infantry Division and US Army Europe. He is a combat veteran of Operation Desert Storm and Operation Enduring Freedom. Most recently he served four years at NATO Land Headquarters in Germany and deployed to Afghanistan for three tours of duty as director of ISEF's Joint Intelligence Center. He holds a Doctorate in History from the University of New Brunswick along with Master's degrees from the Air Command and Staff College, the Joint Intelligence College, the School of Advanced Air Studies, and the US Army War College. Please join me in welcoming to the Pritzker Military Museum and Library Colonel Douglas V. Mastriano.
(Applause)
Mastriano: It's a pleasure to be with you this evening, and thanks for coming out. This is my first time in Chicago, and it absolutely is a beautiful city. And before I leave out of here I've got to try your pizza, see if it's any better than the stuff we have in Jersey or New York. We'll see, but I'm open-minded about it. My goal today is not just to tell you an interesting piece of history but to give you information on Sergeant York that's relevant to us today, and I hope you walk away from my time with you today not just with the idea that was--I'm informed on your work I know him now, but rather, I see the importance of a life, and I know understand the importance that my life can have that can change the world. And I'll tell you what, the reoccurring theme you're gonna hear throughout my time with you is that what you do in life does matter. That's why we're here; we're honoring someone whose life mattered. And what you do in life, that goes
across generations and even into eternity. You affect people as you come across at work, at home. You might not be the next Alvin York, but you’re gonna influence somebody who's gonna be the next Alvin York or Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, the great hero from Gettysburg in 1863. And we can go on and on and on. But a life does matter. You know, scientists have laboratories to conduct their experiments, and us historians we have a lab as well, and that's the past. And how much better we all can be if we look to the past looking at the experiments of our ideas and theories and avoiding the mistakes of the past by looking to what they did and implementing the things that worked well. So I think that as we're going through this time together discussing Sergeant York in the First World War I think you’re gonna see that the laboratory of the past is worthy to look into. Now the First World War--Europe is conducting commemorations. They have been for more than a year now on the centennial of the war--a hundred years now since the First World War broke out in 1914. It's a somber time. And yet it's forgotten which is a shame. But what happened in the First World War is relevant to us today. If you think about Syria and Iraq, those borders and those nations were created in 1916 between a secret treaty of the British and the French. Sykes-Picot Treaty it's called. We're living with a legacy of that war. If you hear about Ukraine, yes Ukraine existed before the First World War although occupied by Russia then. But the modern borders of Ukraine and all of Eastern Europe, and event he Baltic States go back to World War I. So we're living in a shadow of a war that shaped the people we are and shaped the world that we're living in, and it has--it formed societies. It does matter. Now Sergeant York's life matters much, and we're gonna see how important it is to us today, and the lessons we can take away from a life well lived. So why Sergeant York? I'm often asked this question. Why spend so much time researching him? I'm often asked how long did the book take to write. I say ten years, but really it's much longer than that--more like twenty. It's quite an investment of time. But of course as many of you know he's America's most celebrated doughboy of the First World War, and no doubt that's so because of the movie with Gary Cooper that came out in 1941. For the US Army he's a personification of the warrior ethos. And you can see the various leadership manuals I have on the slide there going back to the '80s where York is a featured member, and his story's discussed and he's pointed to as a soldier that we all should strive to be like. As far as York's story as well, the action he took on 8 October 1918 had strategic effects. I'll speak about that in a minute. And then of course we have the idyllic American tale--a man going from very humble beginnings and making a difference throughout his life even to his dying day. But personally the York story took on life for me back in 1974 when I was a young man. My dad saw the movie come on--the Sergeant York movie with Gary Cooper-- and he suggested one Saturday afternoon I stay, not go outside, and watch this with him. And the movie really bothered me. He wasn't like John Wayne. John Wayne's gonna get the girl, but he's also gonna be the hero, he's gonna take down a lot of enemy on the way, and when no one else stands up John Wayne's gonna make it happen. But here with York in the movie Sergeant York we had a guy who didn't want to be in the army, didn't want to kill Germans, didn't want to be a hero, then when he's offered vast sums of money for compensation for his feat he turned those down. And my thought was, "What's wrong with this guy? Why isn't he like John Wayne?" So it kind of sat with me ever since 1974 when I saw it. Now, granted the movie came out in '41, but it just sat with me over the years. And after joining the army I started digging deeper into the York story 'cause the army's telling me we need soldiers like him, and I'm conflicted. He's a conscientious objector, didn't want to be in the army, didn't want to kill. What do you do with this guy? And as I was doing research I was finding out there's detractors out there, and it's a sad time we are in in the United States of America. We are very good at assassinating our heroes. We want to find the flaws in
our heroes and take them down. I was leading a lecture recently with a group of officers, and one of the ancient leaders that I brought up was General Douglas MacArthur, a hero from World War I and World War II and Korea, a great American. But in the back of my seminar room, several of the officers were snickering. "That guy had such a crazy ego." And on and on with other flaws that he demonstrated throughout his life. Finally a Filipino colonel stood up in the classroom and said, "I don't care what you guys think of him. To my people and to me he's a hero, and I don't understand why you're taking him down--somebody who made a difference in life." And thus was the case with Alvin York. As I was doing the research I was finding that people even from his home state of Tennessee were questioning whether he really accomplished these deeds. Maybe it was a feat of propaganda. Maybe the Germans at this point in 1918 were ready to quit the war so it was really no big deal capturing 132 Germans. And without any basics for these assertions, I was reading these and scratching my head saying, "Well let's find out," and thus began my odyssey to find out the truth and get to the bottom of the York story. My initial research uncovered giant gaps in the history. And to make matters worse is somebody who's into tactical operations and wanting to see soldiers fall on the ground I would find these maps and it was small maps with giant arrows, this is not helpful to somebody who's interested in these sort of things. So in the end I found there was more questions than answers in the research. York was born in Pall Mall, Tennessee just a few miles down from the Kentucky border on 13 December 1887. He was in a large family, the third of eleven kids, and to make matters worse--that's a lot of mouths to feed--it was a farming family, and it was called scratch farmers because the land they had was on rocky soil, and they had to scratch a living from the soil. It was tough. So the farm wasn't producing enough crops to feed the family and pay the bills, so Dad York would spend time in a cave next to their house, and he had a blacksmith's shop in there, and he would shoe horses and do other blacksmithing work. That's not enough. To stretch a dollar even further, the family became great hunters, led by Father York, and they'd shoot foxes and other wild animals in the mountains of Tennessee to sell the pelts and of course provide meat for the family as well. But unfortunately things went wrong for Sergeant York. In 1911 his dad was shoeing a mule in the blacksmith's shop next door to the house, and the animal kicked him, and York's life now was gonna forever take a different direction. He was now in charge of the family because his two older brothers had married and moved on so he's the oldest of the kids left at home. And he's got to take care of his widowed mother and the rest of the children and trying to make ends meet, and this farm was impossible and he couldn't handle the pressure. So York did what many young people do; he rejected the upbringing, the Christian roots that his mom and dad instilled upon him, and he became a backslider. And it was easy to backslide in those days because just a few miles up the road as I mentioned was the Kentucky border. So York would go up to Kentucky border and kick back. Now literally on the border of Kentucky and Tennessee were drinking establishments called blind tigers. Now blind tigers weren't places you went to watch soccer games on a big screen TV; these were bad places. You're gonna go there not just to chase women, but mostly to get drunk, but also while you're doing that get in knife and gun fights as well. And people would die in these drinking establishments. It was bad places to hang out. And so York on weekends, Friday through Sunday, would go to the blind tigers on the Kentucky border and kick back. And normally it was with a few of his friends and couple of his younger brothers. And there were some close calls there, and York was often involved in fights, but he never lost one of them. That's something to keep in mind later on when he joins in the army and he's made fun of for his Christian faith, and he never kicks back, he never fights back, which is interesting. But his favorite game to play when he's hanging out at
blind tigers was called last man standing. Sounds interesting, huh? So they'd go to the blind tiger, him and his friends and a couple of his brothers, they'd buy a couple bottles of heavy liquor, whiskey, and last guy still sober gets to keep what's left over until he passes out. So that's a pretty interesting way to spend your weekend. Obviously Alvin York's mom and his siblings, except for the ones that would drink with him, and the neighbors were concerned about the turn that his life had taken. And a local pastor as well, Pastor Pyle, was worried as well. 'Cause what happened, you know, Father York was such a strong Christian man, respected throughout the community. He was so respected that often times he was called upon to be a judge, to arbitrate--because he was so fair so he could arbitrate between feuding clans and family members. And Alvin York is not following in Dad's footsteps at all. And in Alvin York's own words he says, "I got in bad company and broke off my parents advice. I was wild and bad." Alvin York's life was spinning out of control. His mom would wait up on weekends until he came home, not to yell at him, just to make sure he got home alive. That's the condition he was in. Tired to have the pastor talk to him, but he wouldn't hear anything about it. And then late in 1914--now of course the rest of the world, most of the world, is involved in the First World War. America's not in it yet. So life's going on as usual in 1914 in Pall Mall, Tennessee. And a neighbor girl catches York's eye, and her name is Gracie Williams. Now the problem Alvin York has is the only way he can see Gracie is at church because Gracie's father, Francis Asbury York, doesn't want her--doesn't want his daughter dating this reprobate. And I think no father in this room would want their daughter to date somebody in Alvin York's situation back in 1914. So the only way Alvin York could see Gracie Williams was to go to church. So he'd go to church not to listen to the preacher, but so he could stare at Gracie. And that was an old style Methodist church. It still stands in Pall Mall, Tennessee in fact. And when you went to the church in those days the women sat in the right side and the men on the left side. And it was a typical wooden plank church. They had a little alter up front, not unlike what you see even today. And so Alvin York's going on there on Sundays just to check out Gracie and maybe talk to her afterwards for a little while until her father steps in and pushes him aside. So on the first of January 1915 he hears there's gonna be a revival service, and a preacher's coming down form Indiana. His name is Reverend Russell. And York's intrigued by this outsider coming in from Indiana, but he's going to see Gracie. So he goes to church on New Year's--it's a Thursday, 1 January 1915. And he's kind of eyeballling Gracie across, but he's listening to the preacher. And he says when he's listening to the preacher go through the sermon it's like lighting struck his soul he would say afterwards. The preacher's typical evangelist--bad news, you're a sinner going to hell, but the good news--Jesus can save you. And when York is moved in his heart by this and alter call is given, Alvin York goes to the altar, repents from his sins, invites Jesus into his life, and his friends are like, "What's going on with him?" And so York leaves church, next day is Friday, and his drinking buddies come around-- (knocking) "Come on Alvin. Time to go to Kentucky border. "And Alvin York says, "It's really hard. I wanted to go with them to get drunk," but he's thinking, "I just made this commitment to the Lord, and I gotta follow through on that." And he says no. But like I said he said it was really hard to say no. And they came next week, and he wanted to go again but he's like, "I really gotta stay true to my convictions. I can't go with you guys." And something interesting happened to him. He said, "Every time I said no to the temptation, the easier it became to say no to it." and I would say this is the most important part of the York story, was this the moment in time where he's building his character muscle. You think about this. It's a strange phrase I coined about building your character, but I think York sums it up. Here's what he says about this moment in time. "All the temptations I done went through were to strengthen my character." Does that make sense? So later
on when we see this great hero in the Argonne Forest, France in 1918, I believe it was a merely an outward demonstration, a manifestation of a man he had determined to become. It wasn’t easy saying no to his friends and to resist the temptation. Now, look, he wasn’t perfect. Of course he made mistakes as we all do. But he endeavored to learn from his mistakes, not repeat those things. And he became brave and a warrior on the inside in his heart. So we see him when all odds are against him, the Germans are engaging him with a machine gun, we see this man charge up the hill without any fear, with clarity of thought, it’s because that’s the man he really was on the inside. This is why the York story matters to us—’cause that’s a lesson we all can apply in our own private lives, but it’s a so a lesson we can try to project to the youth in America. These are hard times in our nation, and it’s heartbreaking for many of us who served; but even if you haven’t served it’s difficult times. The nation is in hard way financially. Security situation is daunting, perhaps even less secure than we’d want it to be. Morally we’re collapsing. We see lost our way. We need modern-day Sergeant Yorks to rise up.

There’s gonna be a day when the nation’s gonna look to maybe us or maybe to those coming behind us to stand in a gap, that moment of time when destiny is hinged upon their actions, and I would say hopefully we and the young people behind us can start working on their character muscle so if they’re called upon that day that calls them to noble action, they’ll know what to do, because you don’t become suddenly a hero in the midst of battle. Okay, so he’s building his character muscle. Things have turned around. He’s now second elder of the church— that’s assistant pastor in local parlance. He’s teaching the kid’s choir; he’s leading Sunday school. His friends are like, ”What is wrong with him?” And they’re—but what’s—okay, they’re starting to believe it’s genuine, but Gracie’s dad’s not so sure. ’Cause I want some more time for—so even two years later he still has his doubts. I want to make sure you’re not just doing this to get my daughter away from me, kind of thing. But everything’s looking good. And then the United States enters the war, the First World War, in April 1917, and York’s world turns upside down. He gets a draft notice a couple months later. And when he's reading the Ten Commandments, when it says, ”Thou shalt not kill”, he understands it for what exactly it says. He doesn’t go to the original Hebrew and go, ”Thou shalt not murder”. Of course not. He’s got a third grade education. And so he’s conflicted. ”What do I do?” His pastor, who’s also in charge of the draft notices, says, ”Well, you can apply for exemption.” So he writes on the exemption, ”I don’t want to fight.” That's all he puts down. And of course it’s declined. And he goes to the county board— it's declined. It goes to the state board—it's declined. He's shipped off to the army, and application goes to the federal level, and it's declined as well. You have to serve. So what does he do? And he’s really conflicted in his heart. And he's praying for God to intervene and—”God, why am I going? It says in your word I don't have to kill, and the army’s gonna send me off to kill Germans. What’s wrong here?” And he’s stuck. But thankfully at Camp Gordon, Georgia he’s gonna be assigned to the 82nd Division. Now it's the 82nd Airborne, all the way. And his company battalion commanders both happen to be strong practicing Christians. His company commander's from Augusta, Georgia. His name is Captain Danforth, and his battalion commander's from Rhode Island. And Alvin York says, ”This is the first New England man I ever met,” by the way. And the battalion commander's name is Major G. Edward Buxton. And York is conflicted. Do I tell them that I'm against war? And so he decided just to lay low. He doesn't mention anything to anyone. And he's feeling awkward as this guy from the middle of the mountains of Tennessee and he's surrounded now by Irishmen and Italians and Russian Jews and Greeks, and it's awkward situations, and he doesn't fit in ‘cause when he gets passes to go to downtown Augusta he won't go ’cause it's chasing women and getting drunk, the stuff that he turned away from in 1915. But the officers love him ’cause whatever he's told to do he does without grumbling. He just does
Russians are gonna fall out soldiers to several million in a year. Meanwhile in 1917 while America enters the war we're gonna need their help training our army, and we're gonna go from 220,000 equipped came in 1918, 1917 it was a cold start for the adversaries out of fighting us by his sheer will and ability to give speeches. To make matters worse President Woodrow Wilson believed he could keep America out of the war by remaining neutral and that he could talk America and any potential adversaries out of fighting us by his sheer will and ability to give speeches. So when war came in 1918, 1917 it was a cold start for the United States. Got a tiny army, ill equipped. We're gonna need to borrow equipment from the British and the French. We're gonna need their help training our army, and we're gonna go from 220,000 soldiers to several million in a year. Meanwhile in 1917 while America enters the war the Russians are gonna fall out of the war and quit because of the Bolshevik Revolution.
The Communists take over power, so Russia's out of the war. The Germans now have a million men extra on the eastern front they can fling against the western front to knock the British and French out before the United States can arrive in significant numbers. On top of all that the French endeavored to launch a offensive against the Germans in the southern part of their front, and it's a travesty. The French army is gunned down by the Germans, and it leads to a mutiny of the French army. What do you do? The Russians are out, the French are down, the British are running out of man power, and the United States needs about a year to get off starting from zero to several million men. With the Americans helping out the Allies are able to stop the five German major attacks in 1918. The panic sets in Paris; the government flees. I mean, it was a close rung thing. And then by the summer of 1918 it looks like the French commander and overall commander of all Allied forces--his name is Marshal Foch--Foch believes he can win the war this year instead of waiting until 1919. So his plan is to launch a broad front attack from the English Channel down to the Meuse-Argonne region where the Americans are fighting. So kicking off the attack will be the American Army, American Expeditionary Forces-- AEF. They're gonna launch on 26 September 1918. And it's gonna be followed by the Brits, the French, and the Belgians, and the plan is to overwhelm the German defenders. Sound like 1944, 1945 western front with Eisenhower. I wonder where he got that idea from. Okay, so the last six weeks of the war the United States army is gonna be fighting for its life in the Meuse-Argonne region, suffering 20,000 casualties a week. 20,000 casualties a week. The German defenders are appalled and surprised that the Americans are using 1914 tactics running against machine guns. That's because we weren't ready for war. And the cost of lack of preparedness for war are people's lives. So that's why we have--that's why your tax dollars are funding me to teach at the US Army War College. We're hoping to avoid such travesties again, 'cause the cost in treasure and on lives is just too dear. And we've gone through this before; let's not do that again. So by October 1918 things aren't going very well for the Americans in the Meuse-Argonne sector. As far as the location the Meuse-Argonne is three hours by car east of Paris. And it's northwest of the city of Verdun. In the situation now that's gonna propel York to history, and why we're all here listening to me talk, is--it occurs on 8 October 1918. But the situation and the reason for York's action in the Argonne Forest really begins on the second of October. On the second of October 1918 the French and Americans launch a multi-division attack against the German defenders in the Argonne. The attack goes poorly. The French and Americans are stopped and repulsed by the Germans offenders except 590 Americans under the command of Major Charles Whittlesey break through the German lines, end up a mile behind the German front. They achieve the objective, and they're told to wait. That night the Germans collapse around them. Now these 590 Americans are trapped. Does not look good. To make matters worse, when the Germans surrounded the Americans they cut the telephone wire, and the only way to communicate now is with carrier pigeon. If it could get any worse, it will, because the 77th Liberty Division, the higher headquarters of these 590 Americans who broke through decide to launch an artillery barrage to shielded them from frontal German attacks. Unfortunately that barrage falls short, wounding or killing 89 of the 590 Americans. To make matters even worse if it could be worse--it gets worse. They're down to their last pigeon. The pigeon's name is Cher Ami. And Major Whittlesey tells the pigeon carrier to get that bird out. Major Whittlesey writes a message, "For God's sakes, stop the artillery. You're killing us." they wrap it around the bird's leg, the bird--they let him go, and he's terrified because artillery is blowing up all around him, and he lands on a nearby tree. The private who is in charge of the bird is throwing rocks and sticks trying to scare Cher Ami off, and he won't leave, so the pigeon handler has to climb the tree, scare the bird off, and the bird goes into the next tree over.
And it's like, "Oh, man, here we go again." God bless him. Finally they scare Cher Ami off, and he takes off flying through the artillery barrage, the American artillery barrage. Of course after the barrage begins any wildlife leaves immediately, so the Germans are watching for carrier pigeons because obviously that's how they communicate back then. And whether Cher Ami's shot or hit by a fragment we don't know, but he makes it back to headquarters thereafter missing a leg, missing an eye, and has a hole in its chest. But he's an army bird, and he makes it to headquarters, and he hobbles into HQ delivering the message. Thank God the leg with the message on it didn't get blown off, huh? (Laughter)

Mastriano: Cher Ami gets there, tumbles over, still alive but severely injured, and they stop the artillery barrage. So what do you do? Now we're five days into this, 7 October. Every attempt by the Americans to liberate the lost battalion's not working, so finally some original thought at division headquarters--why don't we take a division and attack the flank instead of all this frontal stuff? Wow. I'm glad somebody thought about that five days into the action. So what happened to Cher Ami? He actually lives another year. He's medically retired, given a citation and a small pension. Some said it was birdfeed, but it was a small pension nonetheless. And you can see him on display at the Smithsonian. He's quite a hero from the First World War. So York's--the plan of attack is to take the 82nd Division and attack into the flank of the Argonne so you can get the Germans from behind. Now the Argonne Forest is rough terrain. It's so bad that to this day the French don't use it. It's just an ancient forest, it's been there since Noah's days, and it's rough. But I would say it does not look unlike the terrain that York used to hunt in in Pall Mall, Tennessee. So the plan of attack for the Americans is on 8 October 1918 at six o'clock in the morning. There's gonna be a fierce artillery barrage shooting against the Germans defenders, and then the Americans can behind that barrage, sweep through the Germans line and get behind the Germans, and liberate the lost battalion. Now seeing this coming thought, the Germans the night before retreated from the lost battalion area though to secure their flank 'cause they see the American attack coming and they don't want to be cut off. So the lost battalion is saved, but York's guys have no idea. So at six o'clock in the morning everyone's lined up near the French village of Chatel Chehery, and there's no barrage. And 6:01, 2, 8, 9. What do we do? We go over in a minute. And the battalion commander, who's now Major Tillman--"We go over with or without a barrage." Great. So the men from York's battalion attack into the Argonne Forest without any preparatory fires. Now the German army was good at what they did. They'd been at this for four years. They knew the Americans were coming. So they created a kill zone in the Argonne Forest. So what you have is the village of Chatel Cheherey with hills jutting up about a hundred meters, thick forests, and there's a dead space behind the forest, wide open, devoid of trees, and then you're in back into the forest again. So several Germans regiments, 120th Landwehr Württemberg, and 125th Landwehr Württemberg regiments were poised to destroy the Americans as they attack through the valley. And sure enough, 6:10 the Americans attacked, the Germans let the Americans come into the valley, and it was terrible. The York's unit is stopped dead in its tracks. And there's suffering extremely high casualties--in fact the highest casualty rate that this regiment's gonna suffer in WWI or WWII. And things are desperate. York's platoon leader is Lieutenant Kirby Stewart from Florida. He's trying to--he's out front leading his men, and while he's out front and gets halfway across that valley a German machine gun shoots his legs out from underneath him, and he rolls over on his belly and crawls forward waving his 45 in the air and cheering the men to catch up with him. The men try to reach him, but unfortunately another spray of bullets hits him in the head, and he's dead. And that's the situation. To make matters worse German machine gun fires are complimented by German artillery fires that start plopping down amongst the ranks
of men. It’s terrible. Unbeknownst to York and the other Americans, there’s two more
German regiments being brought up for a four regimental counter attack to not only push
the Americans back but to secure the eastern flank of the Argonne Forest to drive the
Americans back into the valley. It could not get any worse. Taking over the platoon with
the death of Lieutenant Stewart is Sergeant Harry Parsons from New York City. And he
orders several squad leaders to try to get their men to sneak behind the German lines,
and the squads include York's. So seventeen men, including York, they see a cut in the
valley, they move together as a mass, and they're making their way forward underneath
five German machine guns. And as the German machine gunners are ready to open fire
and kill every last man of those seventeen, that artillery barrage the Americans were
supposed to shoot starts plopping down just in time, providentially. So the Germans are
ducking for cover as the barrage is hitting and as York and the other sixteen Americans
are making their way to the German rear, and they break through. And they slowly
meander their way behind the German lines, and they get about a mile behind the line
moving slowly, and they see a communications trench—actually the borders trench dug
in the 1600s, and they move down that. They come to a little stream, they see two
German soldiers with sanitation--red crosses on their arms, and the soldiers have all
these tin water buckets, and they’re filling them up in the stream. And the German
soldiers see these seventeen Americans. They drop their buckets, making a large clang,
and they run straight back to headquarters. The seventeen Americans including York
chase the two sanitation officers back to headquarters, and they surprise about seventy
German soldiers who were preparing for a counter attack. York and the sixteen other
Americans, they gather their prisoners together to get them to stand up, and they’re
trying to force them together, and the Germans are kind of dragging their feet because
on the hill above are more machine guns, specifically a machine gun commanded by
Lieutenant Paul Lipp. Now Paul Lipp--now what's interesting here is you think about
friendships. Now these guys are Landwehr regiments I imagine from Württemberg. So
the 120th is from Olm, Germany; the 125th is from Stuckart, which means it's like
National Guard. And many of these officers had been together in the army for about a
decade, well before the war began. So we're talking about close friendships here, really
close friendships—always together on the annual maneuvers and what have you. So
Paul Lipp is commanding the machine gun on the hill. He looks down to the meadow
below, sees Americans and lots of German prisoners being squeezed together, and they
yell in German, "Get down! Runte!" And the Germans dive to the ground. The Americans
say, "What was that? What's going on?" German machine gun opens fire, killing six,
wounding three. There’s only eight Americans left, and they’re squeezed in laying on top
with the German prisoners trying not to get hit with the spray of bullets. Lieutenant Paul
Lipp, the guy commanding the machine gun position, tells the machine gunners to keep
the Americans suppressed, keep fire on them so they don’t go anywhere. And he runs
up the hill to try to find more infantry platoons to support the attack 'cause the machine
gun's not very accurate. And in fact some of the German soldiers were hit by the
machine gun spray as well, so they’re yelling in German, "Stop shooting. There’s
Germans down here." And York said you never heard such a racket. So York surveys
the ground. He looks over to his right where is best friend, and really his only true friend
in the army, was standing moments ago--Corporal Murray Savage, the only other
practicing Christian in the unit of enlisted soldiers. And York loved this guy. They used to
pray together, they used to keep each other accountable, they used to study the Bible
together. And he looks over, and Murray Savage was hit by so many bullets that he was
chopped up, and his body was spread across the meadow floor. It was awful. And he
looks over and sees Sergeant Early, who was actually leading the 17th initially; he was
hit by five rounds. And Corporal Cutting was hit by several rounds. And York is the last
noncommissioned officer left. What does he do? And in fact he entered this fight saying, "I'm willing to die for my country but not kills for my country." What do you do if you're one of the guys serving with York? I don't want to be near him. He's gonna be a bullet magnet. But York knows what to do in that instant of time. There's no rage, but he said, "I gotta stop the killing." And it's incredible. He runs up the hill--now look. He's down in the--he's down in the meadow with about seventy German prisoners and seven other Americans huddled on the ground trying not to get killed by the spray of bullets that already killed six and wounded three. And he charges up the hill against the German machine gun. He runs up the hill. Now look, this is 1918, September. We've broken out of the four years of conflict, so there's not this chewed-up ground. This is a thick forest. And York charges up the hill, he outflanks a German machine gunners. Now the machine gun--the Germans of course like any soldiers are using the terrain. And there's two sunken roads there that go back to the medieval times. And there's a machine gun in the lower sunken road with supporting riflemen shooting over the machine gunners heads into the valley below, and they have to stand up to see the Americans 'cause it's a steep slope into the meadow. So York hits the tip of the "V" where those two roads meet. You couldn't pick a better spot. And he picks off the machine gun crew, and then he starts shooting in the infantrymen. And he's yelling for them to surrender, and they won't lay down their arms. And so he kills all nineteen of them. He looks up the hill, and he sees Lieutenant Paul Lipp, the German officer who commanded the machine gun, returning with more German reinforcements headed down the hill towards him. York needs to get back to his men anyway. So he runs back down the hill, passes behind another trench--now, it's another border so it's a straight line trench dug in the 1600s like the other one they came down, and that trench is occupied by about a dozen German soldiers underneath the command of Lieutenant Fritz Endriss. Now you think about it: the Germans are faced one way, and Fritz Endriss happens to turn around and sees an American running behind him. So Fritz Endriss orders to his men, "Bayonet attack. Follow me." And he blows on his whistle so they can hear above the din of battle. And so these twelve German soldiers had no problem with a bayonet attack except the boss is running the wrong way. The Americans are out front and you're running behind. What's going on here? York realizes he's being followed, so he drops his rifle, slides on his side, pulls out his Colt 45 automatic pistol, and stats shooting the enemy from back to front. It's an old hunting trick he learned picking off turkeys. If you shot the lead turkey the others would scatter; you'd get one bird. But if you're quick on the draw, you shoot back to front; you get the whole flock. And he's thinking if I shoot the lead guy everyone else is gonna see him drop, and they're gonna hide behind trees, and then I'm dead. So he's picking them off back to the front, and wow. The last guy to fall is Lieutenant Fritz Endriss. And York shoots--now we found the effects that York apparently shoots him six feet away with his 45, hits Fritz Endriss in the abdomen, blows out his abs, throws him backwards, and he's screaming in pain for help. Now why did York enter the fight today? Because his best friend and his other friends--lesser so--but his other American buddies. What happens next is interesting. 'cause it transcends cultures and nations and warring nations at that. The battalion commander who was captured early in the fight--remember those two sanitation officers, the first two--the first aids men who ran back to headquarters that started this whole thing? The commander was Lieutenant Paul Vollmer. Now he's captured early on, and he's laying down with the mass of troops. When York is fighting off the bayonet attack led by Fritz Endriss, Vollmer is trying to shoot York with his Luger and misses every time. He shoots like I do, I think. God help him. And then his best friend is screaming for help, Fritz Endriss. These guys have been in the army together for a decade really--twelve--about ten years together. And so taking his life into his own hands trying to save his friend's life, Lieutenant Paul Vollmer walks
over behind York, and he's standing in a fire fight. He walks over to him, stands about ten feet away, and yells above the din of battle, "English?" You know, do you speak English? "English?" Now, Paul Vollmer lived in Chicago around the turn of the century. We're in his hometown here. He spent some years here working on the railroad. And he went back home to serve in the army, his obligation back then, and he stayed. So in perfect English, do you speak English--"English?" York turns around and says, "No, not English." And Vollmer's like, "What?" "American," York replies. And Vollmer's like, "Good Lord, if you stop shooting I'll make them surrender." So York pulls his 45 at him and looks at him and says, "Okay, do it." And Vollmer blows on the whistle, and the Germans under the command of Paul Lipp on the hill above come down the hill. What do you do? You now have about a hundred prisoners, you only have seven guys beside himself--so eight Americans, about a hundred prisoners--and you're still pretty far behind Germans lines. So York and the other seven Americans are trying to squeeze the Germans together plus they're picking up the wounded German officer and the other wounded Americans--anyone wounded's coming out with them. And York doesn't even know where he is, so he asked the German officer which road he should take, 'cause he saw two roads: the road by the stream where the Germans soldiers were with water bottles and the road by the machine gun on the hill above. And Vollmer--he's not stupid--he goes, "Take that high road," because eth high road is covered by German machine guns, and if you take the high road we're gonna capture these Americans, and we'll be good to go. And York, even though he's from the country, he's no bumpkin. He goes, "We'll take the other road." So they worked their way back to the road by the stream, start making their way towards the American lines, and they're now behind the 7th Bavarian Company under the command of Max Thoma, a young, motivated officer. And he sees the Americans and German prisoners marching behind him. So he yells to his men, Lieutenant Max Thoma, Engineer Commander, 7th Mineur Company from Bavaria, and he tells his men, "Bayonet attack. Follow me." And so they charge against the throng. And the problem is that York is standing behind Paul Lipp and Paul Vollmer. In fact he has got Vollmer by the scruff of his neck with his pistol in his back, and Max Thoma can't get a shot at the Americans. They're hiding behind the Germans. So York says, "You better get him to surrender." And Thoma won't surrender. "They'll never capture me alive," and him and Vollmer are yelling back and forth. Finally Thoma the Bavarian says, "Alright, I'll surrender only if you take full responsibility." And Vollmer's like, "Of course I'll take responsibility. Stop it." So now we have eight Americans including York with 132 prisoners, and they're making their way out of the valley. They make their way through the fire zone where the Americans were being killed moments before, and Lieutenant Woods, the personnel officer for York's unit, sees this large group of Germans coming, and he's like, "It's a counterattack." And he's gathering other soldier together trying to put up defense against the Germans apparently attacking towards them. But York starts waving at them. "Oh, it's York." And then on top of all that, while York is moving the men across the valley, Germans think it's an American formation, artillery starts plopping around them, so they have to run out of the valley. And thus is the York story. The affect of this though is profound. Because the Americans—they're doomed for defeat. It's supposed to be a four-regiment counterattack because of this only two regiments counterattack. And what those two regiments do when they launch their counterattack at 10:30 against the Americans, the Germans in the North push the Americans out of the Argonne and capture a hundred Americans and kill scores. That would have been the fate of the rest of York's battalion had he not done what he accomplished there. And in fact York's action--it's okay. It's a small action. Significant, 'cause the Germans are forced to retreat from the Argonne Forest, a frontier area--a fortress they were hoping to hold on to through the winter of 1919. So things do matter.
After the war ends of course on 11 November at 11 o’clock in 1918, and there’s an investigation launched to see whether this is worthy of a Medal of Honor, and in February 1919 York goes out to the battlefield with his brigade commander, and they’re walking the ground, and his brigade commander, General Lindsey is scratching his head and doesn’t understand. "How did you do this? It defies logic. You can’t--I don’t understand how you came out alive.” And here’s the conversation that Lindsey and York had. Lindsey says, "York, how did you do it?” And Alvin York replies, "Sir it is not man power. A higher power than manpower guided and watched over me and told me what to do." York then describes, "The general bowed his head and put his hand on my shoulder and solemnly said, ‘York, you are right.’" York goes on to say, "There can be no doubt in the world God being in that. No other power under heaven can bring a man out of a place like that. Men were killed on both sides of me, and I was the biggest and most exposed of all. Over thirty machine guns were maintaining rapid fire at me point blank from a range of about twenty-five yards. When you have God behind you, you come out on top every time." Of course after the investigation General Lindsey approved the recommendation for Medal of Honor. And it was approved by the division commander General Duncan, Pershing approved it, and of course Woodrow Wilson approved it as well. It’s just an incredible story, and it just inspired so many people across the generations. But then here we are in modern times with these detractors out there. We don’t think York really did it, thus propelling this book and so much of the research that I poured into it just to find out if it was so. And I had no agenda. My agenda was to find the truth, not people’s opinions--not even my own opinion. What is out there? And the approach--I tried to take this in a unique way so that, yes, of course we can have discussions and debate about it, but I want it to be a solid study, and it’s the most thorough one that I could think of. So my approach was an interactive and complex research methodology that first began in the archives, and of course not just North American archives. Now that’s the problem with a lot of American scholarship. We’ll just tell whatever’s available in our archives in the USA. If you have a story in Europe, you need to go to Europe and hit the French, German, or British archives. I know it costs money, might be a language barrier, but you gotta get the other side of the story. After that terrain analysis, soldiers look at ground a certain way, and does it make sense that a machine gun would be at this location, and would it make sense to attack in this direction, and so on. And then applying of course how they fight. We call it unit doctrinal templating. How did the Germans fight? How did Americans fight in 1918? And did it make sense from the York story standpoint. And then, now we’re gonna throw in a little science here, ’cause all that is interpretive still. The archive is interpreted with the terrain analysis, with the doctrinal templating. So we received permission from the French to do archeology out there with metal detectors. And then when we had the key artifacts--we never knew they were gonna actually get these artifacts, but when we received them, conducting ballistic forensic analysis. And these sort of things are difficult to refute. So the approach is history plus terrain analysis plus archeology plus forensics will equal accuracy whether the York story was true or not. So of course the approach was hitting as many archives in North America and Europe as possible and is relevant. And in the end it’s about a thousand hours of archival research and about a thousand hours on the ground in the Argonne Forest in France scrutinizing the terrain where York fought on 8 October 1918. Some of the--you know, the idea that it was lost to history; it’s just not true. It was just lost because people didn’t look for it in the right places. There were actually maps in North America and in Germany that delineated clearly where this action occurred. And the maps included a study the Germans conducted after the war. X marks the spot on a map we found. A testimony from one of the officers in Fox Company. York was in Gold Company, G Company. So F Company Lieutenant Cox actually walked to
York's site immediately after the battle, counted twenty-five dead German soldiers, and he pins the place pretty close to where the Germans say. The overlay the Germans used for the battle was sitting in the archives. And of course there was American army photographers out there in 1919 taking pictures of the terrain. You would not think it would take a lot of imagination to find York's spot. And in the end everything was where it was supposed to be and where the history said. The arch--of course the archeology was fantastic. Frustrating times 'cause we had about a 300-by-300 foot area to cover, but where the artifacts should have been, they were. Most were about two to four inches in the French Argonne Forest dirt, down in the meadow a little deeper, but just waiting to be found. And indeed they told a version of the story that was just fascinating to us. And I think it's important for us to carry this on because spoiler alert, the York action did occur. Now what's the so-what? Remember I said at the beginning of this discussion, what you do in life matters? It echoes across the generations and into eternity. And that's why we're here, and that's why I'm speaking to you. Going back to Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, the hero of Little Round Top in the American Civil War on 2 July 1863--you think about this now, and this is the inspiration for my idea of the character muscle. It's not a new idea at all. This is what Chamberlain says about character: "We know not of the future and cannot plan for it much, but we can hold our spirits and our bodies so pure and high, we may cherish such thoughts and such ideals and dream such dreams of lofty purpose,"--why, so what?--"So that we can determine and know what manner of men we will be whenever and wherever the hours strikes that calls us to noble action." Wow. "This predestination God has given us in charge because no man becomes suddenly different from his habit and cherished thought. What you do in life does matter. For good or for evil, it does affect generations down the road, and it could just change the world. Or it could change that person that could change the world. You just never know. The Sergeant York story--this is my conclusion--gives us all hope. You think about this guy from--I don't mean this in a bad way, but from nowhere, Tennessee. Pall Mall, Tennessee. Back then it was cut off from the world. It was a world unto itself. It was like stuck in the 1800s. He's got a third grade education, didn't get to school much because he's got to--had to work on the farm or hunt, you know, or take care of the crops, just had to do what it takes to provide for the family. But yet despite his humble beginning and despite whispers growing up--"He'll never amount to anything," especially after he became a backslider in 1911. "He'll never amount to nothing. He's a good-for-nothing drunk." Wow. How many of us have had those kind of lies spoken to us throughout life? Probably as young, maybe as older when we fell off the tracks. You'll never amount to anything. Don't believe those lies. It's not true. Don't let that hold you back. York didn't let it hold him back, and from any viewpoint his life was not full of hope. An uneducated guy from the sticks of Tennessee with a drinking problem and other problems, and look what a life can do. He went from being a guy who'd never amount to anything to a very virtuous person who gave back more to his country than his country gave to him. From a pacifist to a warrior. How do you do that? Wow. To somebody consumed by self to somebody who constantly gave back to his community. He built two schools in Tennessee, didn't want the kids of his region to be as uneducated as he was. He used his influence to have a highway built through his town to open up the rest of the world to his community. He's someone who really made a difference, and that just might be you. And that's why I focus on the character muscle aspect of this whole discussion here. 'Cause the York story, it's interesting, and it's exciting, and it's a fantastic story, but it tells us something: that you can change the world. Don't listen to the lies you heard growing up. Don't let that hold you back. And if it's not you, maybe somebody you influence will change the world. So my last remark is indeed what you do in life matters.
It echoes across the generations and into eternity. Thank you for your attention very much.

(Applause)

Clarke: Thank you to Colonel Douglas V. Mastriano for a fascinating discussion about Sergeant York and to the United States World War I Centennial Commission for sponsoring this program. The book is *Alvin York: A New Biography of the Hero of the Argonne*, published by the University Press of Kentucky. To learn more about the book, our sponsor, or the Pritzker Military Museum and Library, become a member, and explore all that it has to offer, visit us in person or online at PritzkerMilitary.org. Thank you, and please join us next time on *Pritzker Military Presents*.

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(Theme music)

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