

Sergeant York

By Donna Ross

What distinguishes “Sergeant York” from other films on the National Film Registry, apart from a bravura performance by its star Gary Cooper, is its ability to capture the mood of a United States teetering on the brink of entry into World War II. Had it been made six or more years earlier, it probably would be remembered today as just another biopic, not unlike the dozens that floated around the studios in the 1930s. Looking at it decades later, without the urgency and angst of the period, viewers are likely to find it hokey. But when it premiered in New York on July 4, 1941, it appealed to an American public experiencing mixed emotions about entering another great war. In less than six months, the U.S. would indeed be at war.

A film about Alvin York, the greatest hero of the First World War, could easily be seen as a call to arms, and director Howard Hawks as drawing an analogy between York the reluctant hero and America, a reluctant warrior, wary to take up arms again, but compelled to do what it must. York, who initially declared himself a conscientious objector, became one of the most decorated soldiers of the U.S. Army in World War I. He received the Medal of Honor for leading an attack on a German machine gun nest, taking 32 machine guns, killing at least 20 German soldiers, and capturing 132 others during the Meuse-Argonne Offensive in France.

Had producer Jesse Lasky had his way, the picture would have been made two decades earlier when York’s exploits were fresher in audience’s memories. During that time Lasky repeatedly sought permission to film the heroic deeds of Sergeant York, but York repeatedly refused to cooperate. With another war on the horizon, York finally felt compelled to acquiesce, although he did make three non-negotiable conditions: York’s share of the profits would go to a Bible school he was building in Tennessee; no cigarette smoking actress would be hired to portray his wife; and only Gary Cooper could play the role of Alvin York.

Cooper had already played real life characters Marco Polo and Wild Bill Hickok. Immediately after portraying Alvin York, he landed one of his most memorable roles, that of famed baseball player Lou



Mountain preacher Rosier Pile (Walter Brennan) advises Alvin York (Gary Cooper) on responding to his draft notice. Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.

Gehrig in “Pride of the Yankees.” He would later star as the heroic World War II physician Corydon Wassell in “The Story of Dr. Wassell” and in “The Court-Martial of Billy Mitchell” as the renowned World War I general.

Cooper initially turned down the part. It wasn’t until the war hero himself contacted the actor that he relented. The actor, an avid outdoorsman, met with York at his home in Tennessee, and discovered a natural rapport between them. Audiences and critics alike hailed Cooper’s depiction of the poor Tennessee farmer who struggled to reconcile his religious beliefs and his patriotic duty. Bosley Crowther, writing for the “New York Times,” observed, “The performance of Gary Cooper in the title role holds the picture together magnificently, and even the most unfavorable touches are made palatable because of him.”

Cooper would go on to win an Oscar for his performance. Supporting that performance were Walter Brennan as country pastor and storekeeper Rosier Pile, 15-year-old Joan Leslie as the future Mrs. York, and Margaret Wycherly as Mother York. Also on hand to round out the folksy flavor were Ward Bond, Dickie Moore, June Lockhart, and Noah Beery Jr. In

the later military scenes, Stanley Ridges depicted York's commanding officer as a wise father figure, and George Tobias delivered occasional comic relief.

Hawks had intended to shoot the film outdoors, however prolonged rainstorms forced production indoors. A massive revolving hill was built on Warner Bros.' largest sound stage. The crew could turn it at various angles for different scenes, including a fox hunt, field plowing and a pivotal scene showing York deep in reflection atop a craggy hill at sunset.

Reviewers of the period, including Crowther, observed that the first part of the film is the most engaging. "The picture has all the flavor of true Americana, the blunt and homely humor of backwoods-men and the raw integrity peculiar to simple folk. The later scenes of actual combat betray an unfortunate artificiality," in sharp contrast to the film's earlier naturalness, particularly in its "overly glamorized ending," Crowther concluded.

Four writers were credited with the script, uneven as it may have been, although Hawks asserted in a 1960s interview that "John Huston did it all. He just kept about two or three days ahead of me writing the scenes." Though the writers and the director relied on York's ghost-written autobiography for the film's basic facts, the creative team was often just that: creative. Hawks conceded that the film's turkey shoot scenario early in the film and which serves as a plot device in a later combat scene, and the wetting of the rifle sight (quipping "cuts down the glare") -- were complete fabrications. York wryly observed, "Well, let's put it this way -- I supplied the tree and Hawks put the leaves on it."

York himself attended the film's premiere and expressed his wish that the film would contribute to "national unity in this hour of danger. Millions of Americans, like myself, must be facing the same questions, the same uncertainties which we faced and I believe resolved for the right some twenty-four

years ago."

The film was a huge success: the top-grossing film of the year, thanks in part to a marketing campaign that included a visit by York to the White House where FDR praised the film. Some of the response to the film divided along political lines, with advocates of preparedness and aid to Great Britain enthusiastic ("Hollywood's first solid contribution to the national defense," wrote "Time" magazine) and isolationists calling it "propaganda" for the administration. After its initial release, the film was frequently shown at theaters all over America during the war as a quick replacement for box office flops and as a theme program for bond sales and scrap drives.

Fans and scholars agree that "Sergeant York" is not Howard Hawks' best film, but it may very well have been his most financially successful. Hawks was nominated for an Oscar, but didn't win. In fact, he never won a competitive Academy Award, but was eventually recognized with an honorary Oscar shortly before his death.

Further reading

Jeffrey Meyers, "Gary Cooper: American Hero" (Harper Collins Publishers, 1998)

Peter Bogdanovich, "Who the Devil Made It: Conversations with Legendary Film Directors" (Ballantine Books, 1998)

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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