



Nov, 11, 2017

The Wild Stare crew is on a farm on the Kentucky line today for Veterans Day. We're remembering Tennessee's part in the First World War.

At first glance, Tennessee might seem like an unlikely place for a WWI reenactment, complete with trenches, biplanes and Tommies and Doughboys.

But Tennessee produced one of the most renowned heroes of The Great War, farm boy Alvin C. York, whose incredible feat in October of 1918 made him the most decorated American soldier of the WWI.

York left on patrol during the Meuse-Argonne Offensive in France and came back leading 132 prisoners after taking out 35 machine guns and killing at least 23 German soldiers with his backwoods hunting and skills and marksmanship.

His family farm in Pall Mall, Tennessee is now the Sergeant Alvin C. York State Historic Park. There this weekend, nearly 100 WWI re-enactors are keeping alive the memory of what that awful war was like.

It was the first truly global conflict — from 1914 until 1918, more the 70 million military personnel were sucked into it, fighting for most of the world's nations. The Great War was fought in Asia and the Pacific, in Africa and India, but mostly in the mud between the trenches and the wires in France and tiny Belgium.

When America entered the fight in 1918, more than 100,000 Tennesseans answered the call, part of a 2-million-man-force that joined the hellish conflict "over there." Tennessee produced six Medal of Honor winners, including Alvin C. York.

It was the war where 19th century horse and cavalry tactics and chivalry went to die. Industrial age machine guns and artillery raked the battlefield. Poison gas saw its first widespread use. Newly-invented war planes buzzed the air above, dropping bombs and strafing troops. Craft lurking below the ocean waves torpedoed troop and supply ships.

Called The War to End All Wars, it only set the stage for World War Two 20 years later, a bigger, more deadly conflict that spawned many of today's regional hostilities. Young people who came of age during WWI became known as The Lost Generation in the 1920s due to the restlessness and disillusionment that lingered after the horrors of the muddy battlefields of France and Belgium.

And now for most, it's but a whiff of a distant memory.

Over the weekend in Fentress County on the York farm, re-enactors recreated gas attacks, demonstrated what life was like in the trenches, and even staged a vintage football game, showing how troops let off steam in the rear areas.

Even our Irish wolfhound, Oisin, wasn't entirely out of place in the WWI setting. Dogs were used extensively by both sides, not only as mascots but as messenger dogs and some pulled stretchers.

And then there's Bally Shannon, an Irish wolfhound who'd been in training to be a police dog in Dublin when his handler was called to war. The wolfhound went, too, and helped his human deliver messages to and from the front in France. The wolfhound is credited with saving the lives of ten men by dragging them under fire out of No Man's Land.

An artillery shell wounded both man and dog one day, and the big dog became famous when war photographers snapped his photo in the hospital, where he refused to leave his master's side.

While en route home on a hospital ship, they were torpedoed. All but three men and the Irish wolfhound perished in the sinking. His handler was one of the survivors. After they were rescued, Bally Shannon came

to live in New York, where he finished his days living with a groundskeeper in Central Park.

Writer Walter Dyer in a November 1918 article in Country Living magazine, tells of meeting Bally Shannon in Central Park.

“I thought I had never seen so magnificent an animal. All sinew and brawn, powerful, built on lines of speed, he stood there and received my homage. I placed my hand reverently on his broad, shaggy head and let it slide down his muzzle. He took it for an instant in his mouth with the utmost gentleness. I was a stranger to Bally Shannon, but he was the friend of man.”

“I saw in those eyes the devotion and unquestioning courage that had upheld him that dark night in the Channel water. I saw in them the heritage of his noble race, the spirit of Bran and Luath, of peerless Gelert and the faithful dog of Aughrim. I saw in them, too, the mystery of the dog's wonderful gift for attaching himself to humankind.”