

# Finds help verify York's WWI acts

by Lisa L. Rollins

A research team led by geographer Tom Nolan, a member of MTSU's geosciences faculty, and Dr. Michael Birdwell, an Alvin York scholar and member of Tennessee Tech University's history faculty, recently uncovered more than 1,400 artifacts in Châtel-Chéhéry, France, at the site believed to be the precise location where Sgt. York earned the Congressional Medal of Honor in World War I.

Birdwell and Nolan formally announced the historic find during a joint press conference at MTSU's R.O. Fullerton Laboratory for Spatial Technology on Dec. 8 following their Nov. 12-26 expedition to France, where an international team of historians, archaeologists, geographers and interested parties joined them.

The group included French archaeologists Yves Desfosse and Olivier Brun; Belgian archaeologist Birger Stichelbaut; WWI historian Michael Kelly, a guide with Bartlett Battlefield Journeys in the United Kingdom; military artifact experts Eddie Browne and Ian Cobb of Great Britain; Frederic Castier, historian and official representative of the First Division Museum; the mayor of Châtel-Chéhéry, Roland Destenay; the mayor of Fleville, Damien Georges, who also serves as the regional forester for the Argonne; and Jim Deppen of Nashville.

The November research expedition was the local researchers' second 2006 sojourn to France in search of the precise locale where York was credited with single-handedly capturing more than 100 German soldiers in one of the U.S. military's most storied exploits.

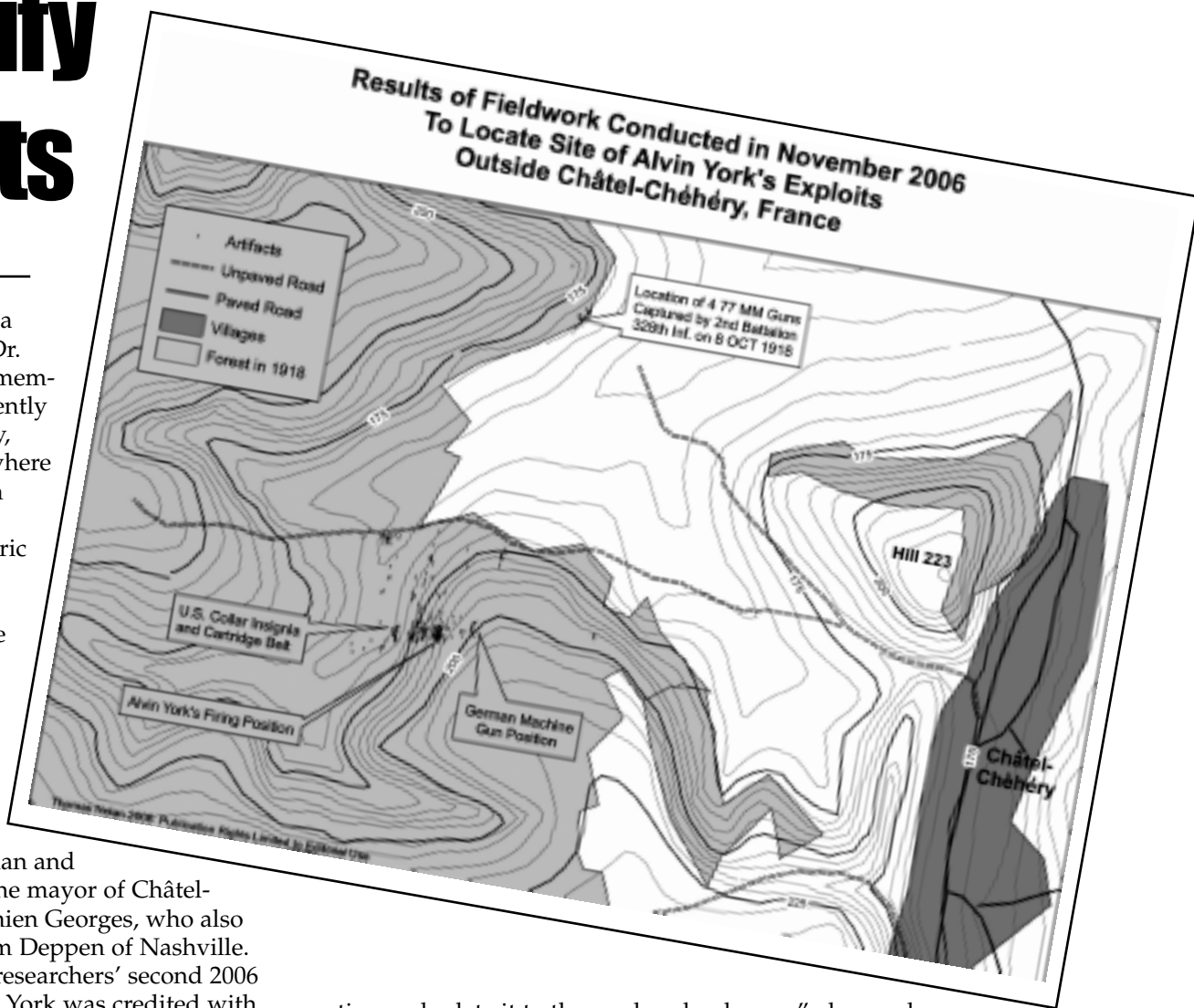
During the previous trip, the researchers returned with the news that they were "80 percent" certain they had located the site, but additional research and work were needed. However, their latest trip confirmed that Nolan and Birdwell were correct in their research.

"Discovery of a U.S. Army collar disk stamped '328 Infantry G,' Sgt. York's own company, added to a preponderance of evidence gathered by the team (that we had found) the location of the battle that occurred near Châtel-Chéhéry on Oct. 8, 1918," Birdwell said.

In addition to the collar disk, the team recovered artifacts consistent with historic documents that described items discarded by German soldiers as they surrendered to York and the seven survivors of Company G. Among the items at the expedition site were German gas masks and filters, German bayonets, Mauser rifle bolts, fired German and U.S. rifle rounds and spent Colt .45 rounds.

In their efforts to locate the York battle site, the researchers called upon advanced mapping technology. Specifically, Nolan used a geographic information system, or GIS, to synthesize spatial information obtained from French and German battle maps and maps annotated by York's commanding officers, Col. G. Edward Buxton and Maj. E. C. B. Danforth, with written accounts by both German and American participants. The information was then superimposed upon the modern landscape to help the researchers focus their metal-detection fieldwork.

"While historic interpretation and surface archaeology were both important, it was geography and GIS that provided the means to interpret that infor-



mation and relate it to the modern landscape," observed Nolan. "Without geography and GIS, we would not have been able to do what we did ... find the York battlefield site."

The researchers' first foray to the Argonne in March 2006 recovered enough material to indicate that the team was looking in the right place, but time constraints made it impossible to search any further.

Upon returning to Tennessee, Nolan and Birdwell continued to conduct historic and geographic research and seek expert advice from the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation and the Tennessee State Museum.

Aside from re-examining affidavits taken in 1919, as well as reviewing correspondence and significant documents from the National Archives in Washington, the researchers also discovered the burial records of the six Americans killed that fateful day—documents that played a role in refining the search area.

Additionally, Nolan said, reviewing 1929 correspondence between Buxton and Capt. Henry O. Swindler discussing the re-enactment of the battle proved crucial to locating the site.

"Although the discarded equipment, ammunition and expended cartridge cases we found have little individual historic value, their spatial relationships and patterns provide confirmation of the historic accounts of the engagement," noted Nolan, who used global positioning system technology to map the locations of the artifacts and display their relationship with other historic data.

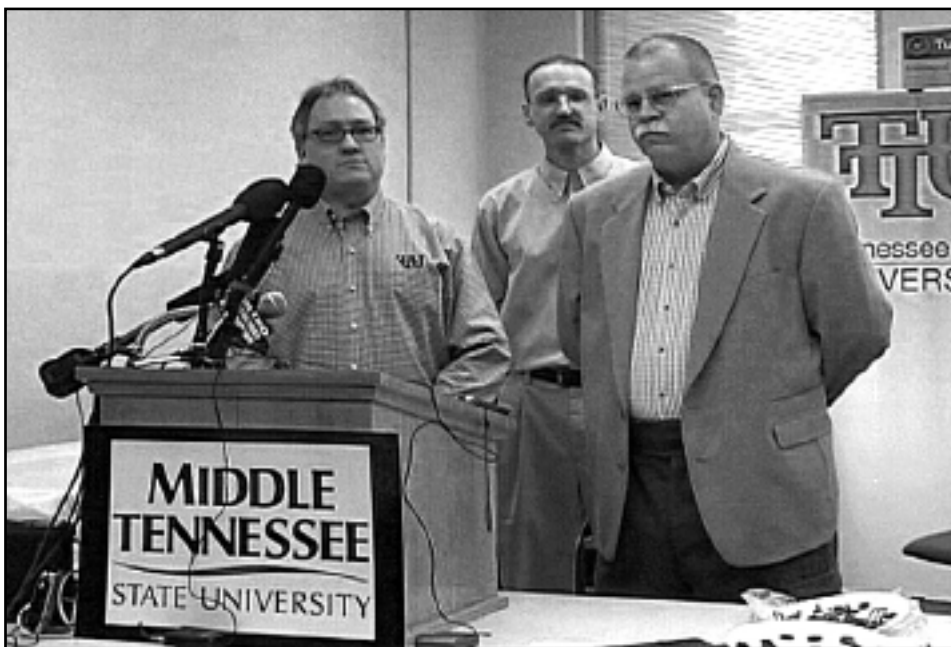


York

The research team currently is identifying and cataloging the artifacts for museum placement. As a result of the team's find, French authorities intend to erect a historic marker at the location of the machine-gun nest overlooking the once-lost spot.

"They are planning to dedicate the marker next October at a ceremony to be attended by the research team and, hopefully, by representatives from the State of Tennessee and the presidents of Middle Tennessee State University and Tennessee Technological University in October 2007," Birdwell said.

For more information, including research updates, please visit [www.sergeantyorkproject.com](http://www.sergeantyorkproject.com).



**A MAJOR DISCOVERY**—MTSU's Tom Nolan, at right in the photo above, joins colleagues Dr. Michael Birdwell of Tennessee Tech, left, and Jim Deppen of Nashville, center, during the December press conference on their historic discovery in France of the site of Sgt. Alvin C. York's World War I capture of more than 100 German soldiers. In the photo at right, Nolan, left, and Châtel-Chéhéry Mayor Roland Destenay listen as Damien Georges, a regional forester with France's forest service, describes the WWI battlefield area where Nolan's team was preparing to map artifacts in March 2006.

photo by News & Public Affairs (top), photo submitted (right)

