

## The Wounded Carbine

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January, 1945. Facing the Colmar Gap in southern France. The coldest winter in Europe in twenty-five years. The ground was frozen hard; the snow, knee deep. Foxholes were impossible, so the two officers and twenty-eight men lay down and slept rough in the open. When the twenty-year-old Second Lieutenant awoke, he discovered that strands of his hair remained frozen to the withered grass and snow.

About two o'clock, the Germans, dressed in camouflage white, attacked. Mortars, artillery, machine guns, around two hundred infantry, and five tanks -Tigers, the best tanks of the War - launched an encircling movement. One of the two American tank destroyers was destroyed, and the other Company B Lieutenant with it. Our Second Lieutenant ordered his men to withdraw and rushed to the remaining, smoldering, tank destroyer. On his field telephone he called Battalion Headquarters for artillery, fired his carbine at the encircling enemy until the ammunition was exhausted and then turned to man the tank destroyer's machine guns. Alone, exposed to enemy fire from three sides, shells bursting around him, bullets and shrapnel ricocheting, he fired at enemy soldiers as close as ten yards away. He continued to fire until the ammunition was gone. Under the Lieutenant's ferocious onslaught, decimated by the close artillery fire he called down from Battalion, and sighting American planes as the skies cleared, the infantry and tanks wavered, and the German force retreated.

An hour had passed since the first shot. The Lieutenant jumped off the tank destroyer - just in time, for it blew up just as he was making his way back to Headquarters. He was bleeding, not so much from the twenty-eight wounds in his legs, as from an earlier wound gone gangrenous. Five pounds of rotten flesh had been cut out from his right buttock the previous October.

Since February, 1944, he had fought in seven major campaigns. He had earned every medal for valor, except one, that the War Department could bestow. In August, 1945, seven months after the Colmar battle, he received the ultimate award: The Congressional Medal of Honor. After the battle, the Lieutenant had been quickly ordered to the safety of the rear. In too many cases the Medal of Honor had been awarded posthumously, and the Army Public Relations men badly needed a live hero.

Audie Murphy became the most decorated soldier ever in the history of the

American Army. He was not yet old enough to vote.

I asked my ex-student thirty-some-year-old who mows my lawn if he knew of Audie Murphy. "Never heard of him." I asked a forty-some-year-old friend and occasional house-and-cat sitter. "Western Theater," he replied, "on Saturday night television. He was half right.

So, another one of my forgotten heroes. Like my first two. Admiral Richard Evelyn Byrd (8 June 1992) and Dr. Wilfred Thomason Grenfell (14 June 2004,) Murphy stood at the forefront of American consciousness. As recently as a quarter century ago, his was the second most frequently visited grave at Arlington National Cemetery. An Audie Murphy movie fan club centered in Dayton, Ohio, flourished in the mid-nineties. Now, the average American under forty knows him not.

"Audie" That is a first name not widely used, if at all, in my Midwest. It was not his mother's maiden name. Curious, I queried an Arkansas anthropologist one noon at the Faculty Club Seasongood table. "Audie," Joe Foster pronounced, "is a diminution of "Armstrong." It seems that George Armstrong Custer's friends gave him the nickname "Audie." Researching and writing a paper for our Club is invariably an educational experience.

Audie Leon Murphy was born on 20 June 1924 into a dirt poor family of tenant farmers in dirt poor cotton-growing Hunt County, East Texas. He was the seventh of eleven children of Emmet (Pat) and Josie Murphy. The family was on relief, sometimes reduced to living in a railroad boxcar. Unless bountiful Methodist ladies from nearby villages brought food for the improvident Irish family, the table was frequently bare. Although the Murphys were Protestant Irish, they were not church goers. Audie seems to have received no religious training. Later, the War was to insulate him effectively against any belief in a benevolent, personal God. He wrote:

I believe in the force of a hand grenade, the power of  
artillery, the accuracy of a Garand. I believe in hitting  
before you get hit, and that dead men do not look noble.

Fed up with his hard-scrabble life. Father Emmet bolted and deserted his responsibilities. He was to drift from one low-paying job to another and finally outlived his famous son. The son, when asked, always asserted, "I have no father." When Mother Josie died, the family broke up. Three children were even sent to an orphanage. No one encouraged young Audie to attend school beyond the fifth grade. He

could barely read a newspaper. Cut loose he held various odd jobs in various East Texas small towns, each of which, later, was to claim to be The Hero's "Home Town." In the severe poverty of his growing up, however, he had developed one priceless talent. He was a crack shot. Often, the only meat for family dinner was produced by his marksmanship.

As Pearl Harbor offered opportunity to other poor American men, so also for Audie. The eighteen year-old lad who presented himself before the recruiters was five feet five inches tall, high waisted, and weighed one hundred and ten pounds. He was a good-looking youngster, with a winsome face, small very white teeth, green eyes, and wavy auburn hair that swept back from a widow's peak.

First he tried the paratroopers because he fancied the way they bloused their trousers in their highly polished boots. Not wanted. Then, the Marines. Not wanted. Finally, the less particular Army. Welcome.

Audie loved the Army. He wrote his sister, "...they let you sleep until 5:30. at home, we got up at 4:00." He also fended off well-meaning attempts to keep his puny body - he was nicknamed "Baby" - off the battle lines. Later, he commented on how "...the Army was spared the disaster of another fourth-class cook."

He thrived on the nourishing Army chow and completed basic and advanced infantry training. In February, 1943, Audie was on the North Atlantic, assigned to Company B, U.S. Third Infantry Division. After the January 1945, Colmar battle, he was to be one of the only two original members of Company B who were not casualties.

In Sicily, he picked up medals, was wounded, and caught malaria. It was in Sicily that the no-holds-barred killer Murphy emerged. In a moment between battles, two Italian officers, in full parade-dress on horseback, appeared on the top of a hill. Audie immediately shot both. When an American officer commented that the Italians had not been firing at them, Audie replied that they were the enemy and you killed enemies. He saw his killing of fellow humans as executions and he acted, as he wrote in his memoirs, with "weary indifference."

The executions continued at Anzio. Two sidelights on Anzio: First, an enterprising sergeant had set up brothels on the beach-head and the VD rate was the highest in all of the U.S. military services. Second, trench foot. As during the First World War and as at the Battle of the Bulge, the Army had not provided water-proof footwear. Many soldiers just would not change and dry their socks and a serious epidemic resulted. The

best soldiers, like Audie, did. On a pass in Rome, he enjoyed the favors of both a mother and her daughter. But more of Audie's very full sex life later.

In August, 1944, Audie took part in his fourth amphibious landing, in southern France. The natives were friendly; the occupiers were not. In battle after battle, Company B fought into the interior. Casualties were high and Audio's closest friend was one of them. In his book, *TO HELL AND BACK*, Murphy admitted that he cried. But he refused to cry in the movie. A war hero does not sob before the American public.

By now Murphy embodied the consummate infantryman. He usually wore three weapons: a 45 revolver in his belt, a rifle on his shoulder, and a carbine in his hand. Once, running alone and firing a machine gun from his hip, he cleared out an enemy machine gun nest. That escapade earned him a DSO. Once a mortar shell fell almost on top of him. The burst blew the heel off his right shoe, gashed his foot, and smashed the stock off his favorite carbine. Thereafter, he called it his wounded carbine.

The perfect combat soldier, Audie could kill with any small arms weapon. He had a superb eye for terrain, excellent hand-eye coordination, and he did not hesitate to kill. He experienced every combat situation an infantryman might encounter - from artillery, ambushes, snipers, tanks, to airplanes. He was wounded several times and spent several months in hospitals. He was lucky to survive.

Back in the United States after the Colmar battle, it was suggested that the young Lieutenant might attend West Point. But his physical disability (he could not pass the swimming test,) let alone his fifth-grade education precluded that option. Murphy was back in Texas when an army PR man persuaded LIFE magazine to publish a feature on the returned war hero. The resulting cover photo and article were pivotal. They catapulted Audie into national prominence and set the course for his future. Here was the fresh-faced, brave American boy-next-door who had helped save the world. Smiling, seemingly unaffected by the experience of battle, looking confidently into the future.

Murphy's future was determined by a telegram from James Cagney. The actor was planning to set up his own production company and a Medal of Honor veteran might be a valuable acquisition. Audie accepted.

What Cagney saw was not the LIFE magazine Murphy, but an exhausted, haunted young man. Cagney let him rest, do odd jobs around the ranch, signed him to a two-year contract, and Audie went to Hollywood. He had nowhere else to go. There, he recreated himself. He got rid of his deep Texas drawl, attended actor's studio, got into moving

pictures, and married a starlet.

His first movie appearance was in a 1948 West Point story, BEYOND GLORY, with Alan Ladd and Donna Reed. In a bit part, his acting was, of course, wooden. With practice, woodenness developed into under-playing, not a bad habit for a performer. There were two more pictures and in 1950 he starred in THE KID FROM TEXAS. It was the first of many westerns for Universal Studios, which were to provide his bread and butter for seventeen years. The oaters were shot in about a month, ran just over an hour, and were designed to be part of a double feature. Audie portrayed every mythic western hero and badman, old and young, sometimes twice. They were hugely popular, especially in the South and West, and garnered more than ten million dollars for the King of "B" westerns. The studio made from two to three million each.

The starlet was Wanda Hendrix, an ambitious, five-foot tall brunette from Louisiana. The war hero and the starlet soon became the darlings of the radio and newspaper gossip columnists and of the fan magazines. Good looking, wholesome, and youthful, they posed for a Lane cedar chest advertisement.

The marriage failed. They fought. Audie was unfaithful. He bedded The Ohio State University's Jean Peters, later Howard Hughes' wife, for example. The union came to an end in 1950. Wanda went on to marry the wealthy father of young actor Robert Stack and then another rich old man. She tried a career comeback which fizzled. In April, 1951, Audie married Pamela Archer, a former Braniff Airline stewardess. She was two years older than her husband, college-educated, and deeply religious. They had two sons who occasionally appeared in Audie's movies.

In February^1949^Audie's war story, TO HELL AND BACK, was published. About twenty percent of the book was written by Audie, the rest as-told-to friend and co-author "Spec" McClure. McClure worked for Hedda Hopper, not a bad connection for a young actor. The book received rave reviews and reached THE NEW YORK TIMES best seller list. It went to five printings and then to Bantam paperback. It was recently republished (and reformatted, to the frustration of this speaker who had taken notes on the earlier edition) by TAB as the second of its MILITARY CLASSICS SERIES.

The book is much better than the movie, which came out in 1955. It was made at Fort Lewis, Washington, and Murphy edged out young Tony Curtis to play himself; he is very convincing as the twenty-year-old soldier. And, he did make one point clearly. With cinematic license, the icy January Colmar battle was reenacted by soldiers in summer

uniforms under the clear, warm skies of September. As the only actor in winter jacket and scarf, Murphy played to viewers who had read the book.

A Hollywood professional, Audie participated in the studious full-dress promotional campaign. At the movie's opening in San Antonio, Audie paraded mounted on a stallion and laid a wreath at the Alamo. The picture was a smash hit and Universal Studios greatest hit and money-maker in its forty-two year history. The movie is still available. Our public library has six copies of the video, and, if they're all out when you try for one, I'll lend you my copy. HELL AND BACK enriched Audie by more than \$350,000.

Four years earlier. Director John Huston had coached Audie into his best performances, as the terrified young soldier in Stephen Crane's THE RED BADGE OF COURAGE. (In that McCarthy era, McClure's friend Hedda Hopper assured her audience that there was nothing communist about the film.) After failing at sneak previews, RED BADGE was reworked and cut drastically and the studio gave up on it. It lost money but the critics who counted praised both the film itself and Murphy's performance. Audie was proud of it.

In western movies of the time, rigid custom dictated that the hero never kiss the girl. Such was not the case, however, in the private life of the King of the "B" westerns. Which brings us to Murphy the sexual athlete. He told his friend and ghost-writer McClure that a Texas farm-wife had seduced him when he was a boy of twelve. There were the mother and daughter in Rome. Then, after the War, in one of his Texas "hometowns," the parade dropped him off at his hotel. There would be a banquet and speeches later. With practiced ease, the young soldier seduced the elevator girl (remember them?), then ordered a steak dinner from room service and went to bed. The ceremonies downstairs had to proceed without him. Apparently, few women could resist Audie. When on the hunt, he adopted a sad and wistful little-boy-lost expression that seldom failed to elicit the ultimate in female comforting. McClure said that the number of Murphy's conquests rivaled, perhaps exceeded, those of the notorious Errol Flynn. The more mature among us here tonight might remember a catch phrase of our lubricious adolescence: "In like Flynn."

Audie Murphy seemed to represent a successful transition from the War to a profitable peacetime life and career. In fact, he was a deeply troubled young man. In reality, another casualty of the War. He suffered from what was termed after another war

"Post Traumatic Stress Disorder." He always carried a weapon. Even twenty years after the War he could not sleep at night unless the lights were on. When he did sleep, the nightmares came. German soldiers threatened and his weapon slowly dissolved in his hand until all that remained was the pistol grip. He was impatient with the structures and values of civilian life. "To become an executioner," he commented, "and then come back into civilian life and to be alone in a crowd - it takes a long time to get over it. Fear and depression come over you." For six years he took anti-depressants, until they turned on him. He kicked them, cold-turkey, in his garage, alone.

Nervous, on edge, he sought distraction. He turned his hand to poetry:

Alone and far removed from earthly care  
The noble ruins of men lie buried here.  
You were strong men, good men  
Endowed with youth and much the will to live  
I hear no protest from the mute lips of the dead  
They rest; there is no more to give.

His medals, he said, belonged more to his dead comrades than to him. He also composed country-western songs. Some were recorded by the leading singers of the day. One sold 600,000 copies.

He didn't smoke, drank only moderately, but women, like Natalie Wood, were easy conquests. He earned a great deal of money. He bought and sold ranches, once losing one to a creditor. Above all, he was addicted to the excitement of gambling. He shot craps and played poker on the studio set. He bought and sold horses, a good way to lose money. But, most, at the races his losses were ruinous. Often he would bet \$10,000 a race, three races a day. His friend McClure estimated that Audie probably lost \$3,000,000 in all. Little of his money reached his family and his second marriage was troubled. He might have thousands in cash in his pocket while his wife, Pam, apologized to guests for the worn condition of the living room furniture.

The forty-year-old tradition of "B" westerns on the big silver screen gave way to "oaters" on the small. In 1965, Universal did not renew Audie's contract. Performing was what Audie did, so he made a few independent films, including THE QUIET AMERICAN, with Michael Redgrave. There were a few television appearances. He invested in his own television show, "Whispering Smith," which failed expensively.

In the late sixties, Audie seemed to run out of luck. There was talk of another film. But it was to be Clint Eastwood who played DIRTY HARRY and snarled the

immortal lines, "Make my day." Audie lost \$200,000 invested in North African oil when Libya nationalized the fields after the 1967 Israeli War. He owed a great deal of money and just escaped bankruptcy. Audie struck an abusive dog handler who took him to court. As a father of two teenage boys, he worried about the Vietnam War. He still carried his own deep emotional wounds from his war. He and Pamela were estranged and there was talk of divorce. Now in his late forties, at long last his youthful looks were giving to the face of a hard-living middle-aged man, and he began visiting brothels.

Then came an opportunity for the ex-infantryman, ex-movie star to recreate himself once more into an entrepreneur. In May, 1971, the forty-seven-year-old Audie and five other men took off from Atlanta in a small plane to a business meeting in Martinsburg, Virginia. Twenty-five days later the wreckage and bodies were found near a mountain summit. "Spec" McClure observed, "He took a lot of killing. It took a plane diving into a mountain."

At his memorial service in Forest Lawn, his first wife, Wanda Hendrix, threw herself on the casket of the first of her three husbands, weeping uncontrollably, as much for herself, perhaps, as for Audie. Pamela remained stoic, sustained by her deep Methodist faith.

Audie was buried at Arlington National Cemetery with full military honors on 7 June 1971.

He had earned thirty-three awards for valor, from the French Legion of Honor through the Purple Heart to the Medal of Honor (list attached.)

Audie Leon Murphy was the most decorated soldier ever in the history of the American Army.

## The Medals

Medal of Honor

Distinguished Service Cross

Silver Star with First Oak Leaf Cluster

Legion of Merit

Bronze Star Medal with "V" Device and First Oak Leaf Cluster

Purple Heart with Second Oak Leaf Cluster

Good Conduct Medal

Distinguished Unit Emblem with First Oak Leaf Cluster

American Campaign Medal

European-African-Middle Eastern Campaign Medal with one Silver Star,  
Four Bronze Service Stars (representing nine campaigns) and one Bronze  
Arrowhead (representing assault landing at Sicily and Southern France)

World War II Victory Medal

Army of Occupation Medal with Germany Clasp

Armed Forces Reserve Medal

Combat Infantryman Badge

Marksman Badge with Rifle Bar

Expert Badge with Bayonet Bar

French Fourragere In Colors of the Croix de Guerre

French Legion of Honor, Grade of Chevalier

French Croix de Guerre with Silver Star

French Croix de Guerre with Palm

Medal of Liberated France

Belgian Croix de Guerre 1940 Palm