

David McClure's¹ First Letter to Col. Red Reeder² dated March 27, 1964

From the Stan Smith Collection, Historical Research Center, Texas Heritage Museum, Hill College, Hillsboro Texas

Comments? Comments are welcome. Just use the link below to our message board.
<https://www.audiemurphy.com/msgb/viewtopic.php?f=1&t=4802>

“DEAR COLONEL REEDER:
Frank McCarthy contacted Audie Murphy about the Medal of Honor biographical sketch you wish to include in your book. And Audie turned the matter over to me. He asked me first to thank you for your interest; to assure you that he would be honored to appear in a book with your by-line; and to wish you success on the project. But he asked me to give you the straight facts on the action that brought him the Medal of Honor. The truth has been so distorted by publicity, haphazard news accounts, and the motion picture “To Hell and Back” that it is hardly recognizable anymore.

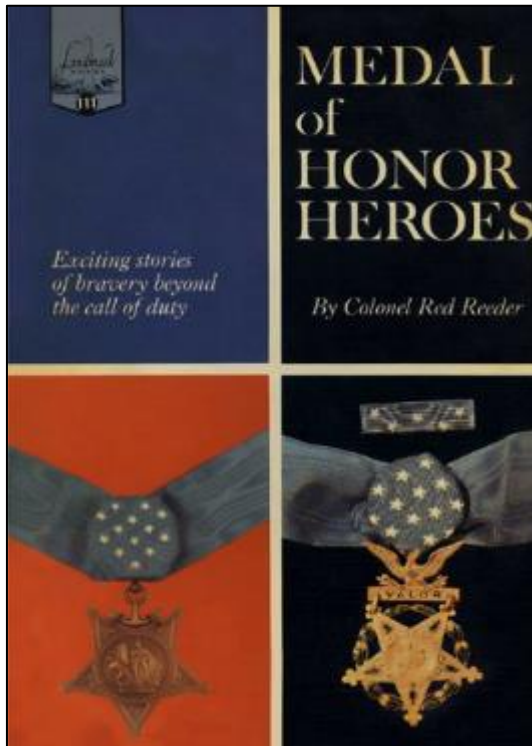
“I have been a close personal friend of Audie's for around seventeen years; and he often says that I know more about him than he does himself. I helped him put his autobiography – that is, the book

Editor's note: Colonel (Col.) Russell Potter “Red” Reeder, author of notable historical works including *Medal of Honor Heroes* was a West Point graduate, class of 1926, who served on active duty until 1946. He later became a West Point instructor (<https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/80690926/russell-potter-reeder>). Based on an inquiry, David McClure – Audie Murphy's friend, writer, and biographer – responded with two letters. A copy of McClure's responses were later given by McClure to Stan Smith, Audie Murphy National Fan Club President, who communicated with McClure and often shared other information. Smith's collection of documents were recently turned over to the Heritage Museum of Hill College with his recent passing in 2021.

version – together in 1948. In the summer of that year, Audie was invited

¹ David C. McClure was a World War II veteran who later became a writer and columnist in Hollywood. McClure and Murphy became friends after the war. McClure transcribed and edited Murphy's biographical account *To Hell and Back* as Audie Murphy dictated the story to him. McClure and Murphy's friendship continued through the years until Murphy's death in a plane crash in 1971.

² Reeder, R. P., & Walker, G.-. (1965). *Medal of Honor Heroes*. Random House.



-Photo from Amazon.com

Book cover from "Medal of Honor Heroes" written by Colonel "Red Reeder"

to France to receive the Legion of Honor; and I went along with him. We visited two of his old battlefields: The one that brought him the Distinguished Service Cross; and the other that brought him the Medal of Honor. With Audie, I studied the features of the terrain while he explained to me what happened. I also made some rough pencil sketches of the battlefields while the memory was still fresh.

"The account of how Audie won the Medal of Honor in the book "To Hell and Back" is fairly accurate. At the time of the writing Audie was too exhausted and indifferent to details to give a good

picture, however. The film version of the action made me sick because it caught neither the drama nor the truth. Audie does not like to discuss the war and especially his part in it. This is not due to modesty or remembered horror. The subject bores him unutterably. So for the past seventeen years I have tried to uncover the real record. The job has not been easy. I have studied maps, newspaper accounts, citations, letters. I have talked to men who were in his company. And Audie himself will talk to me for about fifteen minutes at a time about the war before he gets bored. So I have pieced together the record as accurately as I know how.

"The reason I have dedicated myself to this job is that I believe that Murphy will some day be a legend in the true sense. In an age of nuclear warfare, no other man will likely have the opportunity to do what he did as an infantryman. So I am going to tell you the truth in an effort to give you as complete a picture as possible. Naturally the material will be too long. But you can cut it as you see fit. I am sure that you would rather have the real story. You are in a position to help straighten the record out. I would personally appreciate your help. And I'm sure Audie would too.

"I have often wondered what the real story was behind Sergeant Alvin York in World War I. As you know, it is practically impossible to translate military

maneuvers into a language that the civilian can understand. York is credited with killing twenty Germans, forcing the surrender of 132 more, and capturing thirty-five machine guns with a rifle. Undoubtedly he was a very brave and able man, but I cannot see how he could possibly have performed this feat unless the Germans, who were already thoroughly beaten, were just ready to surrender. Any soldier knows that one machine gun against a rifle is a pretty rugged affair. Just before I entered the Army myself, I was on the set where they were filming the story of Sergeant York, and I asked the director, Howard Hawks, who he was going to show this action. He replied, "Do you mean whether I believe it or not?" I told him yes. He said he did not believe the action took place according to the records, but he was going to try to stage it to make it appear possible. I later saw the picture, and he did a fairly good job of it except for one thing. Any soldier knows those Germans wouldn't have put themselves in such a position, even for Howard Hawks.

"To understand Murphy the soldier, one must first understand Murphy the man. His natural looks are most deceiving. Beneath that shy exterior is a keg of dynamite with the fuse lit. Inwardly he is as hard as steel. He has the Irish temperament in spades, with his moods constantly changing. He has more natural humor than Bob Hope. The Murphy humor is scathing and



-Source: [The Story of the Mexican War](#)

Colonel Red Reeder, veteran, author, historian, and West Point Instructor

penetrating, striking at the very roots of the folly of man. It operates best when he is under great pressure. He has the mind of a genius, and I do not use the word mind lightly. But he has never cultivated it properly. Again typically Irish, his mind is at constant war with his emotions with the latter usually dominating.

"I have never seen a man with such fast reflexes. With him, to think is to act. But if he thinks too much, he loses the advantage of reflex. For instance, we have often hunted quail. If Audie fires on instinct, he is deadly accurate. But if he starts tracking the bird with his gun, he is apt to miss. His vision is fabulous. It must be far better than twenty-twenty. He

often points out tiny objects to me at night; and even with his help I cannot see them except upon close inspection. His sense of smell is very acute. He is annoyed by odors that I cannot even detect. During the war, he was sent out to capture prisoners for intelligence on night patrols. He was able to locate the Germans by the smell of the tobacco they smoked and thus gain the advantage of surprise.

“Although he took no care of his teeth for years, he still does not have a single cavity. We have the same dentist; and he told me that Audie had one of the best sets of teeth he had ever seen. Murphy's memory is photographic. After a glance at a movie script, he will go before the camera and do the scene. He loathes acting, incidentally, but find that it is the easiest way for him to make a living. His greatest pleasure is found in gambling. Given the right odds he would bet that the sun wasn't shining at high noon on a cloudless day and then try to prove it. He lives life as if he were constantly playing a long shot. He fought the war the same way, using every physical and mental asset to back up his gamble.

“Briefly Audie is a physical and mental phenomenon. He seems to be a mutation by birth as he resembles none of his relatives that I have met except in looks. This is the type of boy that went to war. I assure you that his fantastic war record is no more fantastic than his

character. His string of medals was no accident. I have never understood what motivated Audie in combat. He has a strange sense of loyalty. He might take my last pair of shoes if he needed them; but there is nobody on whom I would call faster in a real emergency. He would somehow get through hell and high water to come to my aid. He has often said that he could not operate unless he had his back against the wall. So in civilian life, as in war, that is where he usually keeps his back – straight against the wall. “I never seek trouble,” he says. “Trouble has a way of looking me up.”

“Audie has a flaring temper, but is incapable of prolonged anger. He has too much humor. His sense of loyalty – call it esprit de corps – led him to stick with his beloved Company B, 1st Battalion, 15th Infantry Regiment throughout the war. He joined the company as a replacement private in North Africa. Winning every promotion in the field, he was the commanding officer of Company B in less than two years. Between Sicily and Rome, he was knocked out by malaria three times. He does not know exactly how many times he was wounded. But he has a Purple Heart with two clusters. The sheer luck of the Irish saved his life on occasions. For instance, a mortar shell struck between his feet, knocking him unconscious by concussion, tearing off part of one shoe, and breaking the stock of the carbine which he held in his hands. He had caught the base of the cone-

shaped explosion, missing the shower of steel, which killed several men standing a few yards away. Audie went to the rear, had his foot dressed, got a new pair of shoes, and returned to action within a few days.

“He stuck in the front lines at Anzio until he collapsed from malaria, blacking out completely. At the time he was a platoon sergeant. Two of his men, finding him unconscious and therefore unable to resist, carried him to an aid station on an old door. He awoke in a hospital too

weak to move. But within ten days he was back in the lines and fighting.

“He was not a model soldier by the book. On Anzio, Company B was pulled out of the lines for a brief rest. Audie had been recommended for a promotion from staff to tech sergeant. But he disobeyed an order to put his men through close order drill. He refused to drill the men until they had found proper quarters for the rest period. His promotion was turned down; and Murphy was used as a public example of how a soldier should not act.



-Source: Lillian Bailey Collection

Audie Murphy and Spec McClure revisit the battlefield at Ramatuelle, France - 1948

For more information visit the Audie L. Murphy Memorial Website at www.audiemurphy.com

“In France he was sent on a night reconnaissance patrol with strict orders not to fire unless in an absolute emergency. But he detected a German patrol slipping down the road toward him and he could not resist the opportunity to stir up a quiet fight. He stationed his men to one side of the road, fixed his bayonet, and charged the lead German. The bayonet hit, but failed to kill. The German screamed, and all hell broke loose as the frightened and confused patrols fought their way out of what was thought to be a trap. Upon reporting his mission, he said, “Sir, a German started screaming out there, and we had to shoot him.” A weary colonel guessed the truth. “Yes, goddamit, I know, Murphy,” he said. “You won't be happy until you get yourself killed.” Audie was disappointed in his attitude. As per order he had not fired until the Germans started shooting. He had merely used a bayonet.

“Audie is not a devil-may-care kind of fellow. In the war he was often very frightened; but he never allowed fear to stand in his way. He has told me that when moving into a fight, he had the feeling that somebody had stuck a cold hand in the middle of his intestines and was twisting them into knots. But the feeling went away usually once he got into action. He also told me that it seemed that he had been grappling with fear all his life. He and fear had each

other by the throat, and he never knew which was going to conquer.

“This then is a brief sketch of the man beneath the uniform: Tough as nails, yet as sensitive as dawn; an exhibitor of extreme courage who grapples with fear; a man perfectly coordinated for combat; a man endowed with acute physical and mental resources; and a man who could laugh at his own epitaph. He was no Boy Scout. He did not know that he was regarded as a hero until brought home. Upon learning the public attitude, he ducked the homecoming celebration in San Antonio, went to a hotel, and fell asleep, missing the banquet at which he was announced as the most decorated foot soldier of World War II. Newspaper reporters awakened him to give him the information. He used the occasion to borrow a ride to Dallas from one of the reporters. But he paid for the ride. The reporter wrote an article quoting Murphy on “Why We Fight”. It was a complete dream-up and so flowery that Audie, had he read it, would have been aghast. I still have a copy of it. From then on Murphy was never able to escape publicity. He said that he would not talk; so the reporters wrote their own stories. I knew him for years before I ever saw his medals. Three days ago he called to ask if I had his citations. I told him that I did not. He said then somebody must have thrown them away. He didn't know what became of them. For his wounds he receives \$107.⁰⁰ a month compensation.

He hasn't the slightest idea whether or not he was the most decorated soldier of World War II. Nor does he care. "I know no live heroes," he says. "All the real heroes are dead." That about sums up his attitude.

"Thus you may see, Colonel Reeder, why somebody like me must keep the records if they are to be kept. Any writer who has asked me about Audie I have told the truth. They have refused to believe me as my description does not fit the public image. The real image is far more intriguing to my mind.

"The story of how Audie got the Medal of Honor should properly begin with October, 1944. At the beginning of the month the advance of the 15th Infantry Regiment has been stopped by a fiercely defended German strongpoint known as the Cleurie rock quarry in the Vosge Mountains. On October 2nd, 1st Battalion Commander Lt. Col. Michael Paulick took out a daylight patrol to reconnoiter enemy defenses. The patrol was ambushed and pinned down by a German machine gun approximately 35 yards from the Americans.

"Murphy was not officially on the patrol but had tagged along slightly in its rear. Upon hearing the fire, he worked his way to fifteen yards from the gun and stood

up to throw a grenade. The Germans saw him, turned the machine gun upon him, and fired. But the barrel struck a bush, deflecting the aim, and the Germans missed Audie. Before the enemy could recover, Murphy had thrown two grenades into the nest, killing four of the crew and wounding three more; thereby destroying the position and relieving the patrol. For this action he was later awarded the Silver Star.

"Three days later, on October 5th, Company B, was again stopped about two and a half miles beyond the quarry. The Germans were in a strange defensive position, having machine gun installations on a downward slope of a hill. Their infantry soldiers were in foxholes covered by criss-crosses trees. Murphy, then a staff sergeant, moved down the hill with twenty-seven men to get a closer look at the enemy positions. The weather was rainy and visibility poor. The Germans discovered Murphy's maneuver and fired at the group with a machine gun. Six of the men were killed or wounded before they could drop to the ground.

"Audie grabbed a 536 radio³ and moved forward alone to a spot where he could observe. He called down 4.2 chemical mortar fire on the Germans for approximately an hour. While directing

antenna and operated with a large rubber button on one side. It featured a microphone and ear piece on an adjacent side and had a range of about 300 feet in unobstructed conditions.

³ The SCR-536 was a five-pound hand held radio powered by a large dry-cell battery and vacuum tubes. It was turned on by extending a metal

the mortars by radio, he kept the Germans away from his position with a carbine, engaging in several close-range duels. Official records list fifteen Germans killed and thirty-five wounded in the fight, mostly by the accurately directed mortars. For his action Murphy was again awarded the Silver Star, thus receiving the same medal twice in three days.

“On October 14th, Audie, with two other enlisted men, was called to Regimental Headquarters. The three received field commissions as second lieutenants.

“On October 26th, Murphy, while directing his platoon through a forest area, received a severe hip wound from a German sniper, who fired from a camouflaged foxhole at a thirty-five yards distance. Audie, knocked down by the bullet and unable to rise, killed the sniper with a single shot from his carbine.

“Because of weather conditions, Murphy did not reach a general hospital for three days. Meanwhile, his wound had become gangrenous. He virtually had to learn to walk again. In early January of 1945, he was still in a state of convalescence. But tired of the monotony of hospital life, he did not wait for orders. Collecting his gear, he returned to the front and rejoined his old Company B.

“At the time the Third Division was engaged in the reduction of the Colmar Pocket, an engagement later regarded as the division's second toughest assignment of the entire war. The Pocket, a huge and heavily fortified bulge stretching from the Rhine into France, had to be eliminated. Strategically it amounted to a strong bridgehead from which a counter attack could be launched. It also posed a constant and harassing threat to the right flank of the Seventh Army. The Germans were daily building up the strength of the Pocket.

“The terrain, studded by forests and fields, consisted of gently rolling hills and much flat ground. The earth was frozen solid by weather temperatures that seldom rose above fourteen degrees. The conditions thus were almost perfect for heavy armor. When Audie rejoined the division, the snow was almost knee deep. His Company B was at full combat strength, including a surplus of officers. Murphy was not then given a platoon.

“On January 22, 1945, the division was ordered to begin a full-scale coordinated attack against the strongly defended positions of the Germans across the Fecht River. With an enormous supply of armor, the enemy had turned virtually every village in the area into a powerful fortress. The 7th and 30th Infantry Regiments crossed the Fecht River and fought their way to the Ill River capturing

a bridge, known as the Maison Rouge, across the Ill.

“The little bridge was to play an important role in battle development; for upon it depended getting armor across the stream to support the infantry attacks. Anticipating the capture of the bridge, the division had rushed supplies and armor to the area so that an immediate crossing could be effected [sic]⁴. But the first tank that tested the bridge caved in the structure, rendering it useless for vehicles.

“The 30th Infantry soldiers had already crossed the Ill. Its attack had been coordinated with a drive by the 7th Infantry on its right flank and a similar push by the French on the left flank. The immediate objective was a large forest, known as the Bois de Riedwihr, which stretched between two powerfully fortified villages: Riedwihr and Holtzwihr.

“By the afternoon of the 23rd, the 30th, without armor support, had captured the forest and reached the outskirts of the two villages. The advance had been so rapid that the forward artillery observers had not established radio communications. Nevertheless the 30th continued its attack. Without a vestige of cover and with no possibility of digging into the frozen earth, the 3rd Battalion was hit by ten German tanks and tank

destroyers with an estimated 100 infantrymen on the outskirts of Holtzwihr. The unit was cut to pieces. The survivors managed to fall back to the Ill.

“The same fate befell the 1st Battalion on the outskirts of Riedwihr. The 2nd Battalion managed to cross the Ill, but was likewise thrown back by the enemy's murderous armor assault.

“With the 30th battered, under strength, and badly disorganized, the 15th Regiment was committed to the attack on January 24th. The 3rd Battalion went in first, but was stopped by a counterattack.

“The 1st Battalion, to which Audie Murphy belonged, entered the battle, moving through the 3rd, and driving to the Bois de Riedwihr. Still without armor support, the unit was soon knocked out of the forest but refused to retreat to the Ill. The soldiers managed to get cover in shell holes.

“Audie, still wearing a bandage over his wounded hip, remembers that he dropped off to sleep and his hair froze to the ground on that first night of attack. The following day he was knocked down by a mortar shell blast. His lower legs were peppered with steel fragments, which he still carries in his flesh. All accounts say that he received those

⁴ affected

wounds on the third day of battle. But the truth is: The second day, or the 25th of January.

“Murphy did not stop for first aid. The wounds were painful, but only slightly disabling. For the remainder of the battle, however, he could not walk without limping. During the ferocious counterattack, Audie saw the two men who had been commissioned with him jump into a shell hole. There they received a direct hit by a mortar shell, and both were killed.

“During the night of January 24-25th, engineers had bridged the Ill River, enabling armor to cross. Three tanks joined the 1st Battalion. Two were destroyed by the Germans; and the third, with its main gun out of commission, had to withdraw from the fight. But more armor moved up. The 1st Battalion again moved into the forest; and Battalion headquarters were established in a farmhouse in the woods.

“By midnight on January 25th, Company B had penetrated the Bois de Riedwihr to a depth of about six hundred yards when it halted because of an ammunition shortage. Having started the fight with around 155 men and six officers, the company had been cut to two officers and about twenty-eight men in the two days of ferocious combat. The others had been either killed or wounded. Around one o'clock in the morning, fresh

supplies and five replacements reached the company. The figures are approximate as Audie is depending upon his memory; but the records bear him out as being approximately right.

“A senior officer, a first lieutenant, was in charge of the company as it was ordered to advance to the edge of the forest with two tank destroyers and hold the line there until relieved. As the Germans still were in the woods, but in poor strength, the company advanced with bursts of precautionary fire but had no fight. Reaching their destination, the men tried to dig in, but could barely chip the frozen ground. Thus they were without cover except for sparse trees. During the night the senior officer was wounded by mortar or shell fire. He was evacuated, and Murphy was ordered by telephone to take over command. Having started with Company B as a private less than two years before, he thus became its commanding officer.

“During the night when the men could not dig in, Murphy kept them stamping around in the snow to prevent their feet from freezing. He had strung them along a three hundred yard front at the edge of the forest. His right flank was left completely exposed. The left was loosely connected with men of probably the 3rd Battalion, which was also badly under strengthened. When dawn broke Audie studied the situation, fearing an attack. The weather was extremely cold and

quite cloudy. At his company position the Bois de Riedwihr ended abruptly at the center. However on each side the forest continued in thick long fingers toward the village of Holtzwihr, giving the shape of a huge rough U. Company B held the right portion of the U butt. Between the fingers of trees were open fields extending to Holtzwihr, about a mile away. The village was in plain sight of the men on the edge of the forest.

“From Holtzwihr, a one-way dirt road, about twelve feet wide and frozen solid, led along the right tree-finger and directly in to the forest. It was along this road that the two tank destroyers had moved up the previous night. One had stopped at a position about forty yards in front of Company B. The second had halted at the edge of the forest and formed part of the company line. A forward artillery observer, Lieutenant Walter Weispfenning, had taken a post with a radio between the two TD's⁵. Audie had established his company command post back of the second tank in a drainage ditch, which was from three to four feet deep and flanked the length of the dirt road. For his CP⁶ he had a field map, a pair of binoculars, and a field telephone connected with Battalion headquarters a mile deep in the forest. Audie had a carbine, his favorite weapon for fighting in wooded areas.

“Upon studying the situation, Murphy saw that the first TD could be maneuvered in an emergency. But the second, due to the flanking ditch and narrow position in the trees, could not. He also believed it could be plainly seen from Holtzwihr with binoculars. So Audie awoke the TD commander and advised him to get under cover; to get some kind of concealment. But the commander, afraid of getting stuck if he moved off the road, chose to remain where he was.

“Company B was merely in a defensive position at its best. Plans called for a Battalion – Audie does not remember which nor can I find any records of which – to fan through the battered company and attack Holtzwihr. It was probably the 3rd Battalion of the 30th Infantry which finally completed the assignment after a day's delay for reorganization and reinforcement. The time of the German attack varies in accounts from 10:00 in the morning until 2:00 in the afternoon. The latter is usually given. Audie does not know as he says he had lost all time sense. The day remained dull and cloudy but visibility was quite good.

“At 2:00 in the afternoon – let us say – the Germans began a fierce assault from Holtzwihr. It consisted of six heavy tanks, supported by an estimated 250 German infantrymen who were wearing white snow capes and advanced in ragged skirmish formation. One reference calls

⁵ Tank Destroyers

⁶ Command Post

the tanks Jagdpanthers. Suddenly all hell broke loose. Audie believes that the attack was preceded by an enemy artillery barrage, but there was so much noise and confusion he is not certain. The tanks, fanning out over the frozen ground and using the tree fingers for partial cover, were throwing in a barrage of their own. The first American tank destroyer began firing and Audie remembers seeing a 90 mm shell – he insists they were 90 mm and not 75 – hit one of the tanks flush and did not even cause it to falter. He said he never used the machine gun against the tanks as he did not wish to waste his ammunition. Its cartridges, for some reason, were not armor-piercing. I have read accounts which said that Murphy fired upon the tanks to “button up”. But Murphy declares this is not true machine gun was helpless against the iron monsters.

“A corporal and a staff sergeant, for some reason I have never learned, were evidently doing all the firing from the first TD. Nobody else is mentioned in the account. According to the news story the two men alternated between firing the big gun directly at the tanks and spraying the infantrymen with 30 and 50 calibre machine guns at the beginning of the attack. But in trying to maneuver their TD into a new position they lost control of it. The TD slipped into the drainage ditch and stuck. It could not be budged and the

guns remained at a useless angle for firing. So the crew took off. Because of the position of these guns Audie skipped it and resorted to the second TD later on in the fight. When I visited this battlefield in 1948, the first TD was not there, so evidently it was retrieved and put back into battle. However, the second TD was within a few yards of its old position, having been dragged off the road into the brush at the edge of the forest.

“At the outset of the attack the second TD had received a direct hit from a German eighty-eight. The shell had penetrated the armor killing the commander and gunner. It also started a fire inside. What remained of the crew climbed out of the TD and disappeared into the forest. Audie says that a thick black smoke was boiling out of the TD hatch and he always assumed that the grease, oil and rags inside were burning.

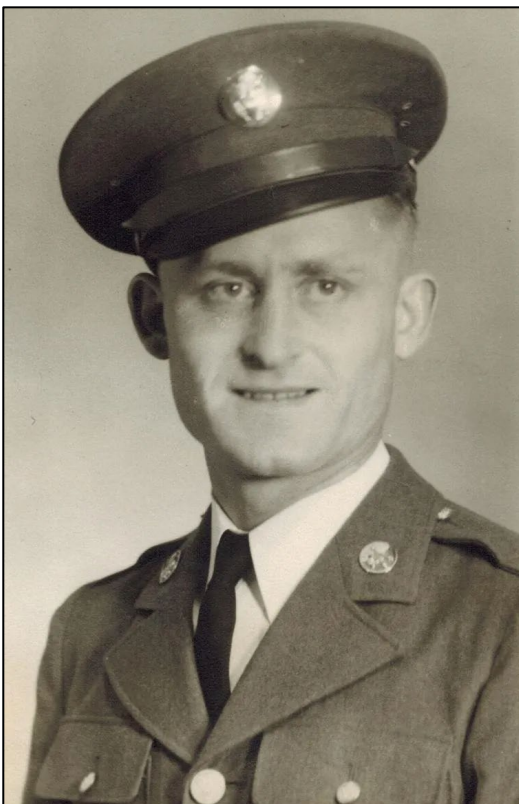
“Lt. Weispenning, the FO,⁷ had been trying to get our artillery down on the enemy by radio. But the radio could not establish good communication because of some defect that had developed. Audie, who had been firing at the German infantrymen with his carbine, saw that the situation was desperate if not hopeless. He ordered his men to fall back to a prearranged position, another ditch, about a half mile deep in the woods. He also asked Lt.⁸ Weispenning to move slightly to his rear and save the

⁷ Forward Observer

⁸ Lieutenant

radio while he tried contacting the artillery with the field telephone through Battalion headquarters. Audie told me the reason he sent his men back was that he couldn't see why all had to get killed when one man could do the job that had to be done. And it was up to him to do it. Murphy seldom fought alone if help were practical, but he never risked men if he did not need them.

“For the remainder of the fight he relayed his instructions to the artillery by the field telephone through Battalion headquarters. He was never in direct



*-Source: Audie Murphy Research
Foundation collection*

Lieutenant Walter Weispfenning, 39th
Field Artillery Regiment, 3rd Infantry
Division.

contact with artillery. And he used an ordinary field map to correct the fire. But his corrections were remarkably accurate. I have never understood why – nor does he – the Germans concentrated their attack upon his position unless they were trying to get control of the road so they could move their armor into the forest.

“In point of fact he was alone in his position, but Lt. Weispfenning remained closely in the rear to take over the artillery corrections if Murphy needed him or got killed. So he was able to observe Audie at all times. So were several other soldiers. In his desperate spot, Murphy alternated between grabbing the field telephone and correcting the artillery fire and dropping the phone to grab his carbine and keep the German infantrymen away from him. During this crisis one of those ridiculous things of war happened. A lieutenant in Battalion headquarters called Audie and asked how close the Germans were. Audie gave his now famous reply: “Just hold the phone and I'll let you talk to one of the bastards.”

“Audie told me that he had no idea of how he would ever get out of the spot, but for some reason he didn't care a damn. With his carbine ammunition depleted he started to fall back. Then he got the most audacious idea of his audacious army career. On the burning TD was a perfectly good fifty calibre

turret machine gun and Murphy saw no reason for not taking it over. Dragging his telephone behind him, he climbed on top of the TD and took over. The body of the dead tank commander was sprawled over the hatch with his throat cut. Murphy pulled him out and threw him in the snow so that he would not interfere with the machine gun movements. The burning TD was literally a powder keg with the fuse lit. As soon as the fire reached the diesel oil and ammunition it was apt to blow sky high. Even the German tanks were giving it a wide berth. And Audie had placed himself smack on top of it. Thus the two powder kegs, meaning Murphy and the burning TD, got together. Lt. Weispfenning, in his account, says that Audie's act was "the bravest thing I ever saw a man do in combat".

"Once in position Murphy began to cut the German foot soldiers down with the machine gun and correcting the artillery fire by phone. The infantrymen could not figure where the machine gun fire was coming from as they thought nobody was crazy – or brave – enough to be on the dangerous TD. But the tanks spotted Audie. They slammed two more eighty-eight MM⁹ shells into the TD, enabling Murphy to get off another famous crack. He was calling back artillery instructions to a Battalion headquarters sergeant when one of the shells hit the TD.

Weispfenning says that each time the TD was struck by cannon fire Audie was engulfed in smoke and flames. The sergeant, hearing one of the explosions, yelled over the wire: "Are you still alive, Lieutenant?" Murphy yelled back: "Momentarily, Sergeant. And what are your post-war plans?"

"I asked Audie if he recalled the hits by the eighty-eight. He said he remembered getting the hell shook out of him a couple of times but that was nothing new.

"The tanks, failing to knock Audie off the TD with the eighty-eights, tried to get him with machine guns. But they never touched him. In reminiscing with me, Audie said: "I can understand why those foot soldiers didn't get me. But I can never forgive those blasted tanks for missing me." He meant, of course, that he was glad to be alive, but was disappointed in the enemy marksmanship, which is typical of the way he thinks. He has a great respect for the fighting Germans.

"The smoke boiling from the turret was both good and bad. It offered him some concealment, but it also interfered with his vision. Twelve German soldiers creeping down the drainage ditch reached a point about ten yards from Audie. But still they could not locate him. They had stopped and were frantically discussing something directly before the

⁹ millimeter

TD. Murphy saw them and killed them with the machine gun.

“Lt. Weispfenning later reported that from his position Audie was clearly exposed, making a silhouette against the snow and leafless trees. But Murphy had committed one final audacity. He called his artillery virtually down upon his own position. “I figured that I could luck out the barrage if those goddamned Germans could,” he told me. “With those shells bursting all around me, they couldn't even hear the machine gun, much less locate it.” It was an insane – or brilliant – piece of strategy, possibly saving his life. The correction was his last. His telephone went dead. The wire had been cut either by artillery or the Germans who had managed to bypass Murphy and infiltrate the woods. A few got as far back as Battalion headquarters. And during a lull at the front, the headquarters personnel were fighting a mile deep in the woods.

“The clouds broke for a single brief period during the entire day; and some planes from the 1st TAF happened over. Seeing the combat below, they swept [sic] down and strafed the Germans on Audie's far left flank. The enemy infantrymen were falling back, and the tanks were wavering, unwilling to proceed without the foot soldiers, when Audie crawled off the TD. It was then that he noticed his field map, which he had been holding in his outstretched

hands, had been tattered by flying rocks and steel fragments. His raincoat, which he was wearing, was likewise full of holes. But not one new fragment had penetrated Murphy's skin during the terrible fight. He was still limping from his mortar wound; so observers thought he had been hit again. That is why the official reports says he was. Audie told me that he was so tired and frightened when he climbed off the TD that he did not look back to see if he would be shot. He no longer cared. In a short while he heard the TD blow up.

“Audie found his men, regrouped them, and counter-attacked the Germans who had infiltrated into the forest. He regained his old position at the edge of the woods and he held it until the following day when Company B was relieved of the strain. The 3rd Battalion of the 30th Infantry Regiment on January 27th assaulted Holtzwihr, taking the town with relative ease. The Germans had pulled out most of its strength. Murphy remained in the fighting until the complete reduction of the Colmar Pocket on February 6th. On February 18th, the 3rd Division, with mission completed, was pulled out of action to rest and reorganize for an assault against the Siegfried Line. It went back into combat on March 15th. By this time, it was known that Audie had been recommended for the Medal of Honor so his superior officers pulled him out of the lines and made a liaison officer of him to

reduce the danger. They feared that Murphy would be killed before he had a chance to receive the Medal otherwise. However, Audie remained with the 3rd Division until the final German surrender. And despite regulations he could not be kept out of action. He had great fondness and respect for the regular commanding officer of Company B, Captain Paul Harris. While serving in liaison, Audie got the word that Captain Harris and two other company officers had been killed. Company B had bogged down somewhere in the general Zweibrucken-Kaiserslautern area. Without saying a word to anybody of his mission, Murphy had a sergeant drive him to the general area in a jeep. Then he got out and walked along until he found Company B which had been pinned down in a fire trench. The surviving men were under the command of a young lieutenant and they were all suffering from a severe psychological defeat. Murphy coaxed them out of the trench and took them through the Siegfried Line. Not a shot was fired at the group. Leaving the old company under the command of a young officer, Murphy returned to his duty in liaison. He found he had not been missed in his absence. I learned this story after reading a postwar letter written to Murphy by one of the men he had pulled out of that jam. And I

asked Audie to explain the circumstances.

“In the Holtzwihr action, Audie is credited with killing and wounding from fifty to a hundred Germans with machine gun, carbine and artillery fire. Of course, the figure is approximate. The details of this Holtzwihr action can be found in the 3rd Division History¹⁰, pages 283-324. You will find the maneuvers as well as the strategic importance of this fight there. The book also has excellent maps.

“In Audie's fantastic stand against the Germans at the edge of the Bois de Riedwihr, many factors are to be considered. The frozen ground was favorable to the enemy as it did not permit Company B to dig in, while providing a good surface for German armor. The small drainage ditch flanking the road proved the undoing of the TD's. Had not the second been burning and threatening to blow up, the German infantrymen would have almost surely discovered Murphy. Thus Audie was saved by his own audacity and daring maneuvers. All of his skill as a combat soldier was needed; and it came forth. Also the man beneath the uniform had his back against the wall. He had himself a long shot against incredible odds. Knowing Murphy, I don't believe he could have resisted playing his hand.

¹⁰ Taggart, D. G. (1987). *History of the Third Infantry Division in World War II*. Battery Press.

Furthermore, the Germans should have know [sic] better than to kick around his beloved Company B, 1st Battalion, 15th Infantry Regiment. That made him real mad.

“The story of the Holtzwihr action is so fantastic that I have checked it in every way I could. Murphy, from utter weariness, has let his war record be distorted at will. But he has never told anything about it for the records that was not true. I, myself, examined the old TD in 1948. I counted three punctures made by the eight-eight shells in the armor. The inside of the TD was heavily charred, and the turret had been blown completely off along with most of its top. My findings jived with the written accounts. I also talked to Lt. Walter Weispfenning, whose testimony helped get Murphy the Medal of Honor. I had read the testimony and asked Weispfenning if the details were strictly accurate. “As accurate as it could be under the circumstances,” he laughed. “When a man is figuring on getting his ass shot off any minute – and I did – he does not think how the situation is going to look in writing. But Audie earned the Medal of Honor time and again, and I was only happy that my testimony finally helped him get it.”

“I also asked Weispfenning if Murphy were know [sic] well in the 3rd Division before all the publicity about him broke. “Known!” he exclaimed. “When Murphy was in the lines with his men, we in the rear went to sleep. But if Audie sent word that he was falling back, we made ready to get the hell out of there. When Murphy fell back, we all knew that it was time to move.” Incidentally, Weispfenning and Audie had only a brief personal acquaintance. I do not believe they ever met until that frozen morning on the front at Holtzwihr. The last time they met was in 1949 when Weispfenning was brought to Hollywood to appear on the Ralph Edwards radio show “This Is Your Life”.¹¹ The subject was Audie Murphy. At this time, I talked to him. I also spent a great deal of time with Sergeant Emmett Kelly, who was the basis of the character called Kerrigan in the book “To Hell and Back”. I also talked to Jim Fife, the Indian whom we called Swope in the book. At that time, the book had already been published but after meeting the real life characters, I would not have changed them. Murphy's brief description of the men had fitted them perfectly.

¹¹ Listen to the full broadcast by visiting <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MrPaGoBOGY0>



-Photo Source: Wikipedia

Colonel Otto Skorzeny, high ranking and dangerous member of Nazi SS in World War II disarmed by Lieutenant Audie Murphv.

“As a final story about Murphy the soldier and also an indication of – I have gathered material on him, I will cite an incident which began in Paris in 1948. Audie and I lunched with an American Army officer who received the Legion of Honor at the same time Murphy did. This man was with the O.S.S.¹² during World War II and told us about being assigned to kill a high ranking Nazi but could not find him. It was his greatest frustration in the war. “I found him,” said Murphy, and proceeded to tell how. Since I [McClure]

was suffering from a severe hangover, I didn't pay much attention to the details. Some ten years later, I happened to remember the incident while Audie and I were driving along in a car. So I asked Murphy what Nazi he and the American officer had talked about that day. He said: “Colonel Otto Skorzeny.” This made my ears pick up as Skorzeny had once been called “the most dangerous man in Europe”. So I asked Audie how he happened to find him.

“He had already been captured evidently,” said Murphy. “But he was still walking along an Austrian street wearing his sidearms. As the place was full of surrendered Germans still at liberty, I didn't pay much attention to the Colonel, but a lieutenant who was with me went over and asked for the Colonel to please give him his sidearms. It was then that I looked and saw it was Skorzeny. Also I damned near had a heart attack. I practically jumped the distance between us and said to the lieutenant, ‘Don't say please to this sonofabitch. Tell him to give you his goddamned gun.’ The Colonel glanced at me for once second, but that second was damned long. Then he handed over his gun. I recognized Skorzeny from a picture which I thought had been shown to all members of the 3rd Division. Captured or not, as long as Skorzeny had

¹² Office of Strategic Services. An agency of the U.S. government during World War II responsible for obtaining information and for

sabotaging the enemy by secretly inserting trained military agents behind enemy lines.

a gun, he was worse than a mad cobra. At least that's the way I figured him"

"Supposing he refused to give up his gun?" I asked.

"Then I would have killed him," said Audie. "I'd already killed far less deserving of death. Besides I figured had the positions been reversed, Skorzeny would have killed me."

"Was this incident ever reported?" I asked.

"Not as far as I know," said Audie. "It wasn't worth reporting. Skorzeny had already been taken. All we did was pull his teeth. I didn't want to tempt him to shoot anyone else by leaving him a gun."

"This story is typical of Murphy the soldier.

"Not long ago Audie told me of going into a bar at Del Mar while a friend of his had a drink. He didn't want to enter the place, as he said they always meant trouble for him. Somebody was forever wanting to fight. Murphy had scarcely got seated until a man grabbed him by the throat and said, "Up on your feet you so-and-so." Audie turned to his friend and said "See what I told you." Then he recognized the man who had him by the throat as an old war comrade by the name of Red Coles. So Audie finished out the story for me. He and Coles, then a Captain, were moving ahead of their

Battalion in Germany. A sergeant was driving them in a jeep when he made a sudden turn into a village and found around 400 fully armed German soldiers taking a break. Since they didn't know where their Battalion was, Murphy and Coles decided to bluff it out. The sergeant panicked and wanted to cut the jeep around. The officers threatened to shoot him if he didn't drive straight ahead. Murphy with one hand on a machine gun and Coles also fingering a weapon waved in a friendly fashion to the Germans, who thought from the attitude that their outfit was just behind them. Thus they got safely through what might have been a lethal ambush. Coles had become an alcoholic since those days, and that depressed Audie very much.

"Murphy came to Hollywood in September, 1945, at the invitation of James Cagney, who had been greatly intrigued by the photo layout in Life magazine. Some years later Cagney told me that he almost fainted when Audie stepped off the plane. He said Murphy was still badly underweight, limping, greenish in color, and had a southern accent so thick he could hardly understand him. Cagney had reserved a hotel room for Audie, but after one glimpse at him he was afraid to leave him alone in his condition, so he took him to his home where he could watch over him. This was about four months after Audie received the Medal of Honor from

Alexander Patch in Salzburg, Austria, on
June 2nd.

“The full details of how Audie won the
Medal of Honor, as given here, have
never been published. In fact, I have
never put them together before.
However, I intend to write a factual
account of the highlights of Audie’s army
career. He has agreed to cooperate if I
will agree never to ask him about the war
again.

“If I can be of further help, please let me
know.

Sincerely,
David McClure

CC: Mr. Frank McCarthy”

Images of Original Letter:

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March 27, 1964

Colonel Red Rensler
U. S. Military Academy
1015 Merritt Road
West Point, New York

Dear Colonel Rensler:

Frank McCarthy contacted Audie Murphy about the Medal of Honor biographical sketch you wish to include in your book. And Audie buzzed the writer over to me. He asked me first to thank you for your interest; to assure you that he would be honored to appear in a book with your by-line; and to wish you success on the project. But he asked me to give you the straight facts on the action that brought him the Medal of Honor. The truth has been so distorted by publicity, magazines news accounts, and the motion picture "To Hell and Back" that it is hardly recognizable anymore.

I have been a close personal friend of Audie's for around seventeen years; and he often says that I know more about him than he does himself. I helped him put his autobiography—that is, the book version—together in 1946. In the summer of that year, Audie was invited to receive the Legion of Honor; and I went along with him. He visited two of his old battlefields: the one that brought him the Distinguished Service Cross; and the other that brought him the Medal of Honor. With Audie, I studied the features of the terrain which he explained to me what happened. I also made some rough pencil sketches of the battles while the memory was still fresh.

The account of how Audie won the Medal of Honor in the book "To Hell and Back" is fairly accurate. At the time of the writing Audie was too shocked and indifferent in details to give a good picture. However, the film version of the action made me sick because it caught neither the drama nor the truth. Audie does not like to discuss the war and especially his part in it. This is not due to modesty or unrequited horror. The subject buries him unutterably. So for the past seventeen years I have tried to uncover the real record. The fun has not been easy. I have studied maps, newspaper accounts, citations, letters. I have talked to men who were in his company. And Audie himself will talk to me for about fifteen minutes at a time about the war before he gets bored. So I have pieced together the record as accurately as I know how.

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fabulous. It must be far better than twenty-twenty. He often points out tiny objects to me at night and even with his help I cannot see them except upon close inspection. His sense of smell is very acute. He is annoyed by odors that I cannot even detect. During the war, he was sent out to capture prisoners. His intelligence on night patrols. He was able to locate the Germans by the smell of the tobacco they smoked and then gain the advantage of surprise.

Although he took no care of his teeth for years, he still does not have a single cavity. We have the same dentist; and he told me that Audie had one of the best sets of teeth he had ever seen. Murphy's memory is photographic. After a glance at a movie script, he will go before the camera and do the scene. He loathes acting, incidentally, but finds that it is the easiest way for him to make a living. His greatest pleasure is found in gambling. Given the right odds he would bet that the star wasn't shining at high noon on a cloudless day and then try to prove it. He lives life as if he were constantly playing a long shot. He fought the war the same way, using every physical and mental asset to back up his gamble.

Briefly Audie is a physical and mental phenomenon. He seems to be a mutation by birth as he resembles none of his relatives that I have met except in looks. This is the type of boy that went to war. I assure you that his fantastic war record is no more fantastic than his character. His acting of audacity was an accident. I have never understood what motivated Audie in combat. He has a strange sense of loyalty. He might take my last pair of shoes if he needed them; but there is nobody on whom I would call faster in a real emergency. He would somehow get through hell and high water to come to my aid. He had often said that he could not operate unless he had his back against the wall. So in civilian life, as in war, that is where he usually keeps his back—outright against the wall. "If never seek trouble," he says. "Trouble has a way of looking me up."

Audie has a fiery temper, but is incapable of prolonged anger. He has too much humor. His sense of loyalty—call it respect—the corps—led him to stick with his beloved Company B, 1st Battalion, 15th Infantry Regiment throughout the war. He joined the company as a replacement private in North Africa. Winning every promotion in the field, he was the commanding officer of Company B in less than two years. Between Simly and Rose, he was knocked out by malaria three times. He does not know exactly how many times he was wounded. But he has a Turpie Scarf with two slits. The sheer luck of the Irish saved his life on occasions. For instance, a mortar shell struck between his feet, knocking him unconscious by concussion, bearing off part of one shoe, and breaking the crack of the carbine which he held in his hands. He had caught the base of the cone-shaped explosion, missing the shower of steel, which killed several men standing a few yards

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The reason I have dedicated myself to this job is that I believe that Murphy will come by be a legend in the true sense. In an age of nuclear warfare, no other man will likely have the opportunity to do what he did as an infantryman. So I am going to tell you the truth in an effort to give you as complete a picture as possible. Naturally the material will be too long. But you can cut it as you see fit. I am sure that you would rather have the real story. You are in a position to help straighten the record out. I would personally appreciate your help. And I'm sure Audie would too.

I have often wondered what the real story was behind Sergeant Alvin York in World War I. As you know, it is practically impossible to translate military maneuvers into a language that the civilian can understand. York is credited with killing twenty Germans, forcing the surrender of 117 more, and capturing thirty-five machine guns with a rifle. Undoubtedly he was a very brave and able man, but I cannot see how he could possibly have performed this feat unless the Germans, who were already thoroughly beaten, were just ready to surrender. Any soldier knows that one machine gun against a rifle is a pretty roughed affair. Just before I entered the Army myself, I was in the mess where they were filming the story of Sergeant York, and I asked the director, HOWARD HEMCK, who he was going to show this action. He replied, "Do you mean whether I believe it or not?" I told him yes. He said he did not believe the action took place according to the records, but he was going to try to stage it to make it appear possible. I later saw the picture, and he did a fairly good job of it except for one thing. Any soldier knows that those Germans wouldn't have put themselves in such a position, even for HOWARD HEMCK.

Murphy's toughest fights were those for which he was not cited. Usually they were individual duels in which he almost lost his life on a number of occasions.

To understand Murphy the soldier, one must first understand Murphy the man. His natural looks are most deceiving. Beneath that shy exterior is a keg of dynamite with the fuse lit. Inwardly he is as hard as steel. He has the Irish temperament in 1916, and his mood is constantly changing. He has more natural humor than Bob Hope. The Murphy humor is scathing and penetrating, striking at the very roots of the folly of man. It operates best when he is under great pressure. He has the mind of a genius, and I do not use the word kind lightly. But he has never cultivated it properly. Again typically Irish, his mind is at constant war with his emotions with the latter usually dominating.

I have never seen a man with such fast reflexes. With him, no think is to act. But if he thinks too much, he loses the advantage of reflex. For instance, we have often hunted quail. If Audie fires on instinct, he is deadly accurate. But if he starts tracking the bird with his gun, he is apt to miss. This vision is

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away. Audie went to the rear, had his feet dressed, got a new pair of shoes, and returned to action within a few days.

He stuck in the front lines at Audie until he collapsed from malaria, bleeding out completely. At the time he was a platoon sergeant. Two of his men, finding he was unable to resist, carried him to an aid station on an old door. He awoke in a hospital too weak to move. But within ten days he was back in the lines and fighting.

He was not a medal soldier by the book. On Anzio, Company B was pulled out of the lines for a brief rest. Audie had been recommended for a promotion from staff to staff sergeant. But he disobeyed an order to put his hat through close order drill. He refused to drill the men until they had found proper quarters for the rest period. His promotion was turned down; and Murphy was used as a public example of how a soldier should not act.

In France he was sent on a night reconnaissance patrol with strict orders not to fire unless in an absolute emergency. But he detected a German patrol slipping down the road toward him and he could not resist the opportunity to stick up a quiet fight. He stationed his men on one side of the road, fixed his bayonet, and charged the lead German. The bayonet hit, but failed to kill. The German screamed, and all hell broke loose as the frightened and confused patrol fought their way out of what was thought to be a trap. Upon reporting his mission, he said, "Sir, a German started screaming our fears, and we had to shoot him." A weary colonel quashed the truth. "Yes, sergeant, I know, Murphy," he said. "You won't be happy until you get yourself killed." Audie was disappointed in his attitude. As per order he had not fired until the Germans started shooting. He had merely used a bayonet.

Audie is not a devil-may-care kind of fellow. In the war he was often very frightened; but he never allowed fear to stand in his way. He has told me that when moving into a fight, he had the feeling that somebody had stuck a cold hand in the middle of his intestine and was twisting that into knots. But the feeling went away usually once he got into action. He also told me that he expected that he had been grappling with fear all his life. He and fear had each other by the throat, and he never knew which was going to conquer.

This then is a brief sketch of the man beneath the uniform: tough as nails, yet as sensitive as down; an exhibitor of extreme courage who grapples with fear; a man perfectly coordinated for combat; a man endowed with acute physical and mental resources; and a man who could laugh at his own epitaph. He was no Boy Scout. He did not know that he was regarded as a hero until months later. Upon learning the public attitude, he dashed the honorifics of a decoration. But Audie, being so a hotel and tall, making the banquet at which he was announced as the most decorated

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foot soldier of World War II. Newspaper reporters awakened him to give him the information. He used the occasion to borrow a ride to Dallas from one of the reporters. But he paid for the ride. The reporter wrote an article quoting Murphy on "Why We Fight". It was a complete dream-up and so flowery that Audie, had he read it, would have been ashamed. I still have a copy of it. From then on Murphy was never able to escape publicity. He said that he would not talk to the reporters wrote their own stories. I knew his far worse before I ever saw his medals. Three days ago he called me and I told him that I did not. He said that somebody must have thrown them away. He didn't know what because of them. For his wounds he receives \$107.00 a month compensation. He hasn't the slightest idea whether or not he was the most decorated soldier of World War II. Nor does he care. "I know no live heroes," he says. "All the real heroes are dead." That about sums up his attitude.

Thus you may see, Colonel Reader, why somebody like me must keep the records if they are to be kept. Any writer who has asked me about Audie I have told the truth. They have refused to believe me as my description does not fit the public image. The real image is far more intriguing to my mind.

The story of how Audie got the Medal of Honor should properly begin with October, 1944. At the beginning of the month the advance of the 15th Infantry Regiment has been stopped by a fiercely defended German strongpoint known as the Cleoria rock quarry in the Vosges Mountains. On October 20th, 1st Battalion Commander Lt. Col. Michael Paulick took out a daylight patrol to reconnoiter enemy defenses. The patrol was ambushed and pinned down by a German machine gun approximately 15 yards from the Americans.

Murphy was not officially on the patrol but had tagged along slightly in its rear. Upon hearing the fire, he worked his way to fifteen yards from the gun and stood up so threw a grenade. The Germans saw him, turned the machine gun upon him, and fired. But the barrel struck a bush, deflecting the aim, and the Germans missed Audie. Before the enemy could recover, Murphy had thrown two grenades into the nest, killing four of the crew and wounding three more; thereby destroying the position and relieving the patrol. For this action he was later awarded the Silver Star.

Three days later, on October 23rd, Company B, was again stopped about two and a half miles beyond the quarry. The Germans were in a strange defensive position, having machine gun installations on a downward slope of a hill. Their infantry soldiers were in foxholes covered by prize-crossed trees. Murphy, then a staff sergeant, moved down the hill with twenty-seven men to get a closer look at the enemy positions. The weather was rainy and visibility poor. The Germans discovered Murphy's maneuver and fired at the

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armor, the enemy had turned virtually every village in the area into a powerful fortress. The 7th and 30th Infantry Regiments crossed the Peacht River and fought their way to the III River, capturing a bridge, known as the Maison Rouge, across the III.

The little bridge was to play an important role in battle development; for upon it depended getting armor across the stream to support the infantry attacks. Anticipating the capture of the bridge, the division had rushed supplies and armor to the area so that an immediate crossing could be effected. But the first tank that tested the bridge caved in the structure, rendering it useless for vehicles.

The 30th Infantry soldiers had already crossed the III. Its attack had been coordinated with a drive by the 7th Infantry on its right flank and a similar push by the French on the left flank. The immediate objective was a large forest, known as the Bois de Riedwahr, which stretched between two powerfully fortified villages: Riedwahr and Holtzwahr.

By the afternoon of the 13th, the 10th, without armor support, had captured the forest and reached the outskirts of the two villages. The advance had been so rapid that the forward artillery observers had not established radio communications. Nevertheless the 30th continued its attack. Without a vestige of cover and with no possibility of digging into the frozen earth, the 3rd Battalion was hit by ten German tanks and tank destroyers with an estimated 100 infantrymen on the outskirts of Holtzwahr. The unit was cut to pieces. The survivors managed to fall back to the III.

The same fate befell the 1st Battalion on the outskirts of Riedwahr. The 2nd Battalion managed to cross the III, but was likewise thrown back by the enemy's murderous armor assault.

With the 10th battered, under strength, and badly disorganized, the 15th Regiment was committed to the attack on January 24th. The 3rd Battalion went in first, but was stopped by a counterattack.

The 1st Battalion, to which Audie Murphy belonged, entered the battle, moving through the 3rd, and driving to the Bois de Riedwahr. Still without armor support, the unit was soon knocked out of the forest but refused to retreat to the III. The soldiers managed to get cover in shell holes.

Audie, still wearing a bandage over his wounded hip, remembers that he dropped off to sleep and his hair froze to the ground on that first night of attack. The following day he was knocked down by a mortar shell blast. His lower legs were peppered with steel fragments, which he still carries in his flesh. All accounts say that he received those wounds on the third day of battle. But the truth is: The second day, or the 25th of January.

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group with a machine gun. Six of the men were killed or wounded before they could drop to the ground.

Audie grabbed a 516 radio and moved forward alone to a spot where he could observe. He called down 4.2 chemical mortar fire on the Germans for approximately an hour. While directing the mortars by radio, he kept the Germans away from his position with a machine, angling in several close-range shots. Official records list fifteen Germans killed and thirty-five wounded in the fight, mostly by the accurately directed mortars. For his action Murphy was again awarded the Silver Star, thus receiving the same medal twice in three days.

On October 31st, Audie, with two other enlisted men, was called to Regimental Headquarters. The three received field commissions as second lieutenants.

On October 26th, Murphy, while directing his platoon through a forest area, received a severe hip wound from a German sniper, who fired from a camouflaged foxhole at a thirty-five yard distance. Audie, knocked down by the bullet and unable to rise, killed the sniper with a single shot from his machine.

Because of weather conditions, Murphy did not reach a general hospital for three days. Meanwhile, his wound had become gangrenous. He virtually had to learn to walk again. In early January of 1945, he was still in a state of convalescence. But tired of the monotony of hospital life, he did not wait for orders. Collecting his gear, he returned to the front and rejoined his old Company B.

At the time the Third Division was engaged in the reduction of the Colmar Pocket, an engagement later regarded as the division's second toughest assignment of the entire war. The Pocket, a huge and heavily fortified bulge stretching from the Rhine into France, had to be eliminated. Strategically it amounted to a strong bridgehead from which a counter attack could be launched. It also posed a constant and harassing threat to the right flank of the Seventh Army. The Germans were daily building up the strength of the Pocket.

The terrain, studded by forests and fields, consisted of gently rolling hills and such flat ground. The earth was frozen solid by weather temperatures that seldom rose above fourteen degrees. The conditions thus were almost perfect for heavy armor. When Audie rejoined the division, the snow was almost knee deep. His Company B was at full combat strength, including a surplus of officers. Murphy was not then given a platoon.

On January 22, 1945, the division was ordered to begin a full-scale coordinated attack against the strongly defended positions of the Germans across the Peacht River. With an enormous supply of

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Murphy did not stop for first aid. The wounds were painful, but only slightly disabling. For the remainder of the battle, however, he could not walk without limping. During the ferocious counterattack, Audie saw the two men who had been commiserated with his jump into a shell hole. There they received a direct hit by a mortar shell, and both were killed.

During the night of January 24-25th, engineers had bridged the III River, enabling armor to cross. Three tanks joined the 1st Battalion. Two were destroyed by the Germans; and the third, with its main gun out of commission, had to withdraw from the fight. But more armor moved up. The 1st Battalion again moved into the forest; and Battalion headquarters were established in a farmhouse in the woods.

By midnight on January 25th, Company B had penetrated the Bois de Riedwahr to a depth of about six hundred yards when it halted because of an ammunition shortage. Having started the fight with around 155 men and six officers, the company had been cut to two officers and about twenty-eight men in the two days of ferocious combat. The others had been either killed or wounded. Around one o'clock in the morning, fresh supplies and five replacements reached the company. The figures are approximate as Audie is depending upon his memory; but the records bear him out as being approximately right.

A senior officer, a first lieutenant, was in charge of the company as it was ordered to advance to the edge of the forest with two tank destroyers and hold the line there until relieved. As the Germans still were in the woods, but in poor strength, the company advanced with bursts of precautionary fire but had no light. Reaching their destination, the men tried to dig in, but could barely chip the frozen ground. Thus they were without cover except for sparse trees. During the night the senior officer was wounded by mortar or shell fire. He was evacuated, and Murphy was ordered by telephone to take over command. Having started with Company B as a private less than two years before, he thus became its commanding officer.

During the night when the men could not dig in, Murphy kept them stamping around in the snow to prevent their feet from freezing. He had strung them along a three hundred yard front at the edge of the forest. His right flank was left completely exposed. The left was loosely connected with men of probably the 3rd Battalion, which was also badly under strengthened. When dawn broke Audie studied the situation, fearing an attack. The weather was extremely cold and quite cloudy. At his company position the Bois de Riedwahr ended abruptly at the center. However on each side the forest continued in thick long fingers toward the village of Holtzwahr, giving the shape of a huge rough U. Company B held the right portion of the U butt. Between the fingers of trees were

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open fields extending to Holtzweir, about a mile away. The village was in plain sight of the men on the edge of the forest.

From Holtzweir, a one-way dirt road, about twelve feet wide and frozen solid, led along the right tree-line and directly in to the forest. It was along this road that the two tank destroyers had moved up the previous night. One had stopped at a position about forty yards in front of Company B. The second had halted at the edge of the forest and formed part of the company line. A forward artillery observer, Lieutenant Walter Weispfenning, had taken a post with a radio between the two TD's. Audie had established his company command post back of the second tank in a drainage ditch, which was from three to four feet deep and flanked the length of the dirt road. For his CP he had a field map, a pair of binoculars, and a field telephone connected with Battalion headquarters a mile deep in the forest. Audie had a carbine, his favorite weapon for fighting in wooded areas.

Upon studying the situation, Murphy saw that the first TD could be maneuvered in an emergency. But the second, due to the flanking ditch and narrow position in the trees, could not. He also believed it could be plainly seen from Holtzweir with binoculars. So Audie spoke the TD commander and advised him to get under cover; to get some kind of concealment. But the commander, afraid of getting stuck if he moved off the road, chose to remain where he was.

Company B was merely in a defensive position at the best. Plans called for the battalion -- Audie does not remember which nor can I find any records of which -- to fan through the battered company and attack Holtzweir. It was probably the 3rd Battalion of the 30th Infantry which finally completed the assignment after a day's delay for reorganization and reinforcement. The time of the German attack varies in accounts from 16:00 in the morning until 2:00 in the afternoon. The latter is usually given. Audie does not know as he says he had lost all time sense. The day revealed dull and cloudy but visibility was quite good.

At 2:00 in the afternoon -- let us say -- the Germans began a fierce assault from Holtzweir. It consisted of six heavy tanks, supported by an estimated 150 German infantrymen who were wearing white snow caps and advanced in ragged skirmish formation. One reference calls the tanks Jagpanthers. Suddenly all hell broke loose. Audie believes that the attack was preceded by an enemy artillery barrage, but there was so much noise and confusion he is not certain. The tanks, fanning out over the frozen ground and using the tree trunks for partial cover, were throwing in a barrage of their own. The first American tank destroyer began firing and Audie remembers seeing a 90 mm shell -- he insists they were 90 mm and not 75 -- hit one of the tanks dead and did not even cause it to falter. He said he never used the machine gun against the tanks as he did not wish to waste his ammunition. The

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In point of fact he was alone in his position, but Lt. Weispfenning remained closely in the rear to take over the artillery corrections if Murphy needed him or got killed. So he was able to observe Audie at all times. So were several other soldiers. In his desperate fight, Murphy alternated between grabbing the field telephone and correcting the artillery fire and dropping the phone to grab his carbine and keep the German infantrymen away from him. During this crisis one of those ridiculous things of war happened. A lieutenant in Battalion headquarters called Audie and asked how close the Germans were. Audie gave his now famous reply: "Just hold the phone and I'll let you talk to one of the bastards."

Audie told me that he had no idea of how he would ever get out of the spot, but for some reason he didn't care a damn. With his carbine ammunition depleted he started to fall back. When he got the most audacious idea of his audacious army career. On the burning TD was a perfectly good fifty calibre turret machine gun and Murphy saw no reason for not taking it over. Dragging his telephone behind him, he climbed on top of the TD and took over. The body of the dead tank commander was sprawled over the hatch with his throat cut. Murphy pulled him out and threw him in the snow so that he would not interfere with the machine gun movements. The burning TD was literally a powder keg with the fuse lit. As soon as the fire reached the diesel oil and ammunition it was apt to blow sky high. Even the German tanks were giving it a wide berth. And Audie had placed himself smack on top of it. Thus the two powder kegs, burning Murphy and the burning TD, got together. Lt. Weispfenning, in his account, says that Audie's act was "the bravest thing I ever saw a man do in combat."

Once in position Murphy began to cut the German foot soldiers down with the machine gun and correcting the artillery fire by phone. The infantrymen could not figure where the machine gun fire was coming from as they thought nobody was crazy -- or brave -- enough to be on the dangerous TD. But the tanks spotted Audie. They slammed two more eighty-eight MM shells into the TD, cooking Murphy to get off another famous crack. He was calling back artillery instructions to a Battalion headquarters sergeant when one of the shells hit the TD. Weispfenning says that each time the TD was struck by German fire Audie was engulfed in smoke and flames. The sergeant, hearing one of the explosions, yelled over the wire: "Are you still alive, Lieutenant?" Murphy yelled back: "Momentarily, Sergeant. And what are your post-war plans?"

I asked Audie if he recalled the hits by the eighty-eight. He said he remembered getting the hell shook out of his a couple of times but that was nothing new.

The tanks, failing to knock Audie off the TD with the eighty-eight, tried to get him with machine guns. But they never touched him. In reminiscing with me, Audie said: "I can understand why

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cartridges, for some reason, were not armor-piercing. I have read accounts which said that Murphy fired upon the tanks causing them to "button up". But Murphy disagrees this is not true either. The machine gun was helpless against the iron monsters.

A corporal and a staff sergeant, for some reason I have never learned, were evidently doing all the firing from the first TD. Nobody else is mentioned in the account. According to the new story the two men alternated between firing the big gun directly at the tanks and spraying the infantrymen with 30 and 50 calibre machine guns at the beginning of the attack. But in trying to maneuver their TD into a new position they lost control of it. The TD slipped into the drainage ditch and stuck. It could not be budged and the guns remained at a useless angle for firing. So the crew took off. Because of the position of these guns Audie skipped it and resorted to the second TD later on in the fight. When I visited this battlefield in 1948, the first TD was not there, so evidently it was retrieved and put back into battle. However, the second TD was within a few yards of its old position, having been dragged off the road into the brush at the edge of the forest.

At the outset of the attack the second TD had received a direct hit from a German eighty-eight. The shell had penetrated the armor killing the commander and gunner. It also started a fire inside. What remained of the crew climbed out of the TD and disappeared into the forest. Audie says that a thick black smoke was boiling out of the TD hatch and he always assumed that the grease, oil and rax inside were burning.

Lt. Weispfenning, the FO, had been trying to get our artillery down on the enemy by radio. But the radio could not establish good communication because of some defect that had developed. Audie, who had been firing at the German infantrymen with his carbine, saw that the situation was desperate if not hopeless. He ordered his men to fall back to a prearranged position, another ditch, about a half mile deep in the woods. He also asked Lt. Weispfenning to save slightly to his rear and save the radio while he tried contacting the artillery with the field telephone through Battalion headquarters. Audie told me the reason he sent his men back was that he couldn't see why all had to get killed when one man could do the job that had to be done. And it was up to him to do it. Murphy seldom fought alone if help were practical, but he never risked men if he did not need them.

For the remainder of the fight he relayed his instructions to the artillery by the field telephone through Battalion headquarters. He was never in direct contact with artillery. And he used an ordinary field map to correct the fire. But his corrections were remarkably accurate. I have never understood why -- nor does he -- the Germans concentrated their attack upon his position unless they were trying to get control of the road so they could save their armor into the forest.

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these foot soldiers didn't get me. But I can never forgive those blasted tanks for wounding me." He meant, of course, that he was glad to be alive, but was disappointed in the enemy marksmanship, which is typical of the way he thinks. He has a great respect for the fighting Germans.

The smoke boiling from the turret was both good and bad. It offered him some concealment, but it also interfered with his vision. Twelve German soldiers creeping down the drainage ditch reached a point about ten yards from Audie. But still they could not locate him. They had stopped and were frantically discussing something directly before the TD. Murphy saw them and killed them with the machine gun.

Lt. Weispfenning later reported that from his position Audie was clearly exposed, making a silhouette against the snow and leafless trees. But Murphy had committed one final audacity. He called his artillery virtually down upon his own position. "I figured that I could look out the barrage if those goddamned Germans could," he told me. "With those shells bursting all around me, they couldn't even hear the machine gun, such less locate it." It was an insane -- or brilliant -- piece of strategy, possibly saving his life. The correction was his last. His telephone went dead. The wire had been cut either by artillery or the Germans who had managed to bypass Murphy and infiltrate the woods. A few got as far back as Battalion headquarters. And during a lull at the front, the headquarters personnel were fighting a mile deep in the woods.

The clouds broke for a single brief period during the entire day; and some planes from the 1st TAF happened over. Seeing the combat below, they swooped down and strafed the Germans on Audie's far left flank. The enemy infantrymen were falling back, and the tanks were swerving, unwilling to proceed without the foot soldiers, when Audie crawled off the TD. It was then that he noticed his field map, which he had been hiding in his outstretched hands, had been battered by flying rocks and steel fragments. His raincoat, which he was wearing, was likewise full of holes. But not one new fragment had penetrated Murphy's skin during the terrible fight. He was still limping from his earlier wound; so observers thought he had been hit again. That is why the official reports say he was. Audie told me that he was so tired and frightened when he climbed off the TD that he did not look back to see if he would be shot. He no longer cared. In a short while he heard the TD blow up.

Audie found his men, regrouped them, and counter-attacked the Germans who had infiltrated into the forest. He regained his old position at the edge of the woods and he held it until the following day when Company B was relieved of the strain. The 2nd Battalion of the 30th Infantry Regiment on January 27th assaulted Holtzweir, taking the town with relative ease. The Germans had

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pulled out most of its strength. Murphy remained in the fighting until the complete reduction of the Colmar Pocket on February 16th. On February 18th, the 3rd Division, with mission completed, was pulled out of action to rest and recuperation for an assault against the Siegfried Line. It went back into combat on March 15th. By this time, it was known that Audie had been recommended for the Medal of Honor so his superior officers pulled him out of the lines and made a liaison officer of him to reduce the danger. They feared that Murphy would be killed before he had a chance to receive the Medal otherwise. However, Audie remained with the 3rd Division until the final German surrender. And despite regulations he could not be kept out of action. He had great fondness and respect for the regular commanding officer of Company B, Captain Paul Harris. While serving in liaison, Audie got the word that Captain Harris and two other company officers had been killed. Company B had bogged down somewhere in the general Zweibrücken-Kaiserslautern area. Without saying a word to anybody of his mission, Murphy had a sergeant drive him to the general area in a jeep. Then he got out and walked along until he found Company B which had been pinned down in a fire trench. The surviving men were under the command of a young lieutenant and they were all suffering from a severe psychological defeat. Murphy coaxed them out of the trench and took them through the Siegfried Line. Not a shot was fired at the group. Leaving the old company under the command of a young officer, Murphy returned to his duty in liaison. He found he had not been missed in his absence. I learned this story after reading a postwar letter written by Murphy to one of the men he had pulled out of that job. And I asked Audie to explain the circumstances.

In the Holtzwihr action, Audie is credited with killing and wounding from fifty to a hundred Germans with machine gun, carbine and artillery fire. Of course, the figure is approximate. The details of this Holtzwihr action can be found in the 3rd Division History, pages 223-224. You will find the maneuvers as well as the strategic importance of this fight there. The book also has excellent maps.

In Audie's fantastic stand against the Germans at the edge of the Bois de Hiedeloh, many factors are to be considered. The frozen ground was favorable to the enemy as it did not permit Company B to dig in, while providing a good surface for German armor. The small drainage ditch flanking the road proved the undoing of the 99's. Had not the second been burning and threatening to blow up, the German infantrymen would have almost surely discovered Murphy. Thus Audie was saved by his own audacity and daring maneuvers. All of his skill as a combat soldier was needed; and it came forth. Also the man beneath the uniform had his back against the wall. He had himself a long shot against incredible odds. Knowing Murphy, I don't believe he could have resisted playing his hand. Furthermore, the Germans should have

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knew better than to kick around his beloved Company B, 1st Battalion, 15th Infantry Regiment. That made his real mad.

The story of the Holtzwihr action is so fantastic that I have checked it in every way I could. Murphy, from utter weariness, has let his war record be distorted at will. But he has never told anything about it for the records that was not true. I, myself, examined the old TD in 1948. I counted three punctures made by the eight-eight shells in the armor. The inside of the TD was heavily charred, and the turret had been blown completely off along with most of its top. My findings jived with the written accounts. I also talked to Lt. Walter Weispfenning, whose testimony helped get Murphy the Medal of Honor. I had read the testimony and asked Weispfenning if the details were strictly accurate. "As accurate as it could be under the circumstances," he laughed. "When a man is figuring on getting his ass shot off any minute -- and I did -- he does not think how the situation is going to look in writing. But Audie earned the Medal of Honor time and again, and I was only happy that my testimony finally helped him get it."

I also asked Weispfenning if Murphy were know well in the 3rd Division before all the publicity about him broke. "Known!" he exclaimed. "When Murphy was in the lines with his men, we in the rear went to sleep. But if Audie sent word that he was falling back, we were ready to get the ball out of there. When Murphy fell back, we all knew that it was time to move." Incidentally, Weispfenning and Audie had only a brief personal acquaintance. I do not believe they were met until that frozen morning on the front at Holtzwihr. The last time they met was in 1949 when Weispfenning was brought to Hollywood to appear on the Ralph Edwards radio show "This Is Your Life". The subject was Audie Murphy. At this time, I talked to him. I also spent a great deal of time with Sergeant Ernest Kelly, who was the basis of the character called Kelly in the book "The Hell and Back". I also talked to Jim Kife, the Indian whom we called Swepe in the book. At that time the book had already been published but after seeing the real life characters, I would not have changed them. Murphy's brief description of the man had fitted them perfectly.

As a final story about Murphy the soldier and also an indication of -- I have gathered material on him, I will cite an incident which began in Paris in 1948. Audie and I lunched with an American Army officer who received the Legion of Honor at the same time Murphy did. This man was with the U.S.A. during World War II and told us about being assigned to kill a high ranking Nazi but could not find him. It was his greatest frustration in the war. "I found him," said Murphy, and proceeded to tell how, since I was suffering from a severe hangover, I didn't pay such attention to the details. Some ten years later, I happened to remember the incident while Audie and I were driving along in a car. So I asked Murphy what Nazi he and the American officer had talked about that day. He said: "Colonel Otto Skorzeny." This made my ears perk up

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as Skorzeny had once been called "the most dangerous man in Europe". So I asked Audie how he happened to find him.

"He had already been captured evidently," said Murphy. "But he was still walking along an Austrian street wearing his sidearms. As the place was full of surrendered Germanic kill at liberty, I didn't pay much attention to the Colonel, but a lieutenant who was with us went over and asked for the Colonel to please give him his sidearms. It was then that I looked and saw it was Skorzeny. Also I damned near had a heart attack. I practically jumped the distance between us and said to the lieutenant, 'Don't say please to this sonofabitch. Tell him to give you his goddamned gun.' The Colonel glanced at me for one second, but that second was damn long. Then he handed over his gun. I recognized Skorzeny from a picture which I thought had been shown to all members of the 3rd Division. Captured or not, as long as Skorzeny had a gun, he was worse than a mad noble. At least that's the way I figured him."

"Supposing he refused to give up his gun?" I asked.

"Then I would have killed him," said Audie. "I'd already killed many far less deserving of death. Besides I figured had the positions been reversed, Skorzeny would have killed me."

"Was this incident ever reported?" I asked.

"Not as far as I know," said Audie. "It wasn't worth reporting. Skorzeny had already been taken. All we did was pull his teeth. I didn't want to tempt him to shoot anybody else by leaving him with a gun."

This story is typical of Murphy the soldier.

Not long ago Audie told me of going into a bar at Del Mar while a friend of his had a drink. He didn't want to enter the place, as he said they always meant trouble for him. Somebody was always wanting to fight. Murphy had scarcely got seated until a man grabbed him by the throat and said, "Up on your feet, you son-of-a-bitch." Audie turned to his friend and said, "See what I told you." Then he recognized the man who had him by the throat as an old war comrade by the name of Red Coles. So Audie finished out the story for me. He and Coles, then a Captain, were moving ahead of their Battalion in Germany. A sergeant was driving them in a jeep when he made a sudden turn into a village and found around 450 fully armed German soldiers taking a break. Since they didn't know where their Battalion was, Murphy and Coles decided to bluff it out. The sergeant panicked and wanted to cut the jeep around. The officers threatened to shoot him if he didn't drive straight ahead. Murphy with one hand on a machine gun and the other fingerling a weapon waved in a friendly fashion to the Germans, who thought from the attitude that their outfit was just behind them. Thus they got safely through what might have been a lethal ambush. Coles had

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become an alcoholic since those days, and that depressed Audie very much.

Murphy came to Hollywood in September, 1946, at the invitation of James Cagney, who had been greatly intrigued by the photo layout in Life magazine. Some years later Cagney told me that he almost fainted when Audie stepped off the plane. He said that Murphy was still badly underweight, limping, greenish in color, and had a southern accent so thick he could hardly understand him. Cagney had reserved a hotel room for Audie, but after one glimpse at him he was afraid to leave him alone in his condition, so he took him to his own home where he could watch over him. This was about four months after Audie received the Medal of Honor from General Alexander Patch in Salzburg, Austria, on June 2nd.

The full details of how Audie won the Medal of Honor, as given here, have never been published. In fact, I have never put these together before. However, I intend to write a factual account of the highlights of Audie's army career. He has agreed to cooperate if I will agree never to ask him about the war again.

If I can be of further help, please let me know.

Sincerely,

David C. McClure

cc: Mr. Frank McCarthy