

# Rocketman

By Richard Rodgers

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<https://www.audiemurphy.com/msgb/viewtopic.php?f=1&t=4811>

**“ROCKETMAN”** is a term that brings different definitions to mind. A search on the Internet reveals that it was a somewhat well-received movie about pop-singer Elton John in 2019 which included his 1972 hit single song by the same name. This article is not about that.

It is also a political term used early in the administration of President Trump to describe North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un who was busy lobbing short and medium range missiles in the direction of Japan over the Pacific Ocean – some not far from where the author lives who happens to be a U.S. federal employee and citizen abroad. This article is not about that either.

So, what is this article about? And how does the term “rocketman” apply to Audie Murphy? At the risk of making the reader impatient, the answer to this most reasonable question will be revealed shortly.

On April 1, 1921, the author received an email from one of the Foundation’s newsletter subscribers. The email said,

*Hi. My name is Patsy Tweed Vaughn. My father Van James Tweed was in the Army with Audie. He said he was with Audie where the movie To Hell and Back was based on. Is there any way I can find a record of my father being there? Please let me know, Thanks Patsy, you can call me if you would like ...*

Patsy also left a phone number should there be any questions. After digging around a little and consulting with historian Mike West, information was uncovered.

In its second quarterly newsletter, Spring of 1997, the Audie Murphy Research Foundation published excerpts of a July 1997 interview with “Red” Hollace Edwin Ditterline.<sup>1</sup> In the interview, Mr. Ditterline shared recollections of experiences he had with Audie to include

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<sup>1</sup> Audie Murphy Research Foundation Newsletter, page 3, Volume 2, Spring 1997, [https://www.audiemurphy.com/amrf/amrf\\_news2.pdf](https://www.audiemurphy.com/amrf/amrf_news2.pdf)

mentioning other soldiers that he and Audie served with. Mr. Ditterline mentioned one such soldier named Charlie Owen. On page 5 of that interview, Ditterline recalled that

*“Charlie Owen’s nickname might have been ‘Tweed’. Tweed was our bazooka man. I was the guy that carried the shells for the bazooka. I didn’t like that job because every time they had to do something like block a road or hit a pillbox, they’d call for a bazooka.”*

As it turns out, Mr. Ditterline was referring to Patsy’s father and not Mr. Owens.

Patsy’s lack of information about her father’s service is understandable. Army personnel documentation for many soldiers over the last two centuries and for air force servicemen were destroyed in a horrific fire at its St. Louis records warehouse in 1973. It is estimated that perhaps 75% to 80% of all official personnel records were lost in this fire.<sup>2</sup> Sadly, many descendants of World War II soldiers and other wars have no record of their ancestor’s service. Any official document – if found – is valued and treasured.

After consulting the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA)

some documentation was located. Among these was a military registration card. Filed by Mr. Van James Tweed, the card states that he was born February 16, 1915, in Greene County, Tennessee. At the time of his registration, he was living at RFD #1, Powell, (Knox County) Tennessee. He was married to a Mrs. Lavada Beatrice Tweed of the same address and was employed by Bondurant Brothers, 402 Main Street, Knoxville, Tennessee. In the accompanying “Selective Service Registrar’s Report”, also provided by NARA, Tweed is described as 5’ 8”, 160 lbs., blue eyes, brown hair, and ruddy complexion. The date appears to be October 16, 1946. The year may be an error and looks to have been overwritten in ink by hand.

More digging at NARA found an online reference which described Mr. Tweed’s



*An M9 “Bazooka” Team from TO HELL AND BACK. Courtesy of Dennis Stults and Universal Studios.*

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.archives.gov/personnel-records-center/fire-1973>

World War II Military Registration Card, Van James Tweed. Source: National Archives and Records Administration.

REGISTRAR'S REPORT			
DESCRIPTION OF REGISTRANT			
RACE	HEIGHT (Approx.)	WEIGHT (Approx.)	COMPLEXION
White	X 5'8"	160	Sallow
Negro	Blue	X	Light
	Gray		Ruddy
Oriental	Hazel	Brown	X Freckled
	Brown	Black	Light brown
Indian	Black	Gray	Dark brown
		Bald	Black
Philippine			

Other obvious physical characteristics that will aid in identification.....

I certify that my answers are true; that the person registered has read or has had read to him his own answers; that I have witnessed his signature or mark and that all of his answers of which I have knowledge are true, correct and full.

Registrar for Powell 16 Knox Tenn  
(Precinct) (Ward) (City or county) (State)

Date of registration Oct 16, 1946

ROGER F. JOHNSON  
(Signature of Registrar)

SELECTIVE SERVICE LOCAL BOARD NO. 6  
KNOX COUNTY  
KNOXVILLE, TENNESSEE  
(STAMP OF LOCAL BOARD)

(The stamp of the Local Board having jurisdiction of the registrant shall be placed in the above space.)

U. S. GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE 16-17105

Selective Service Registration Card, Van James Tweed. Source: National Archives and Records Administration.

entry at the time of enlistment. Private Tweed enlisted on November 11, 1942, at Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia, for the duration of the war plus an extra six months, if the President deemed those extra months necessary. Mr. Tweed was married when he enlisted, and his education level was listed as “grammar school” and his civilian occupation was “skilled mechanics and repairmen”. A link to this online document is provided in the footnote.<sup>3</sup>

With more help from “Hunter/Gatherer” Mike West, two other official documents absolutely established Tweed’s assignment to B-Company, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 15<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, during the days of World War II.

Government Morning Reports were valuable combat daily reports submitted by units which listed important changes in status of personnel. They included reporting the arrival of newly assigned soldiers, soldiers that were temporarily attached to a medical unit because of illness, wounds, or injury, and any deaths.

Two of Company B, 1-15 Infantry’s morning reports, dated November 17, 1944, and January 5, 1945, specifically mention Van J. Tweed by his name and

<sup>3</sup> U.S. National Archives and Records Administration. See [NARA - AAD - Display Full Records - Electronic Army Serial Number Merged File, ca. 1938 - 1946 \(Enlistment Records\)](https://www.archives.gov/electronic-records/display-full-records) (archives.gov)

service number. These reports can be viewed on the last page of this article.

Unquestionably, Van James Tweed was one of Audie's fellow soldiers.

The nature of Mr. Tweed's work with the Army was probably that of an infantryman although the Audie Murphy Research Foundation hasn't located any discharge papers that can officially characterize his military occupational specialty. Mr. Ditterline did say in his interview that Tweed fired a "bazooka".

Weapons qualifications were a big part of military training and those who received specialized weapons instruction and passed a live-fire examination could receive a coveted certification which was documented in their official records. The certification meant that they could also wear a qualification badge on their dress uniform.

While we do not have the final discharge paperwork of Mr. Tweed's Army service which was lost in the 1973 St. Louis fire, there is a very good chance that he earned the "Rocket Launcher" certification and qualification badge based on Mr. Ditterline's interview.

And what about the bazooka Private Tweed fired?

Originally called the M1 Rocket Launcher, it was upgraded in 1943 to the M9 version. It included several key components including a 61-inch smooth bore rocket tube, a stock (an electrical firing mechanism), and a 2.36-inch diameter rocket.<sup>4</sup> The M9 version weighed 13.25 lbs. (unloaded) and a little over 15 lbs. when armed with a rocket. When fully configured and fired it had no recoil. The 1943 version could penetrate up to 4 inches of armor.

According to the U.S. Army document which specifies exactly what an Infantry Rifle Company in World War II was authorized, an Infantry Rifle Company was authorized five M9 Anti-Tank Rocket Launchers<sup>5</sup>. The arrangement of the five firing teams was probably one for each of the three rifle platoons, one for the heavy weapons platoon, and one for the headquarters platoon.

A soldier who was assigned to fire the M9 had a very dangerous job. Carrying an M9 Rocket Launcher usually meant the firer – and his ammo bearer – were placed as far forward as possible – sometimes with little cover and in an exposed position. When fired, the rocket

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<sup>4</sup> U.S. War Department, Technical Manual TM 9-294, "2.36-Inch A.T. Rocket Launcher M1A1" dated 27 September 1943.

<sup>5</sup> U.S. War Department; Military Table of Organization and Equipment (MTOE) No. 7-17, dated February 26, 1944; <http://www.militaryresearch.org/freebies.htm#Army%20WWII>

left a smoky contrail that traced a path back to its point of origin too. Rocketmen had to quickly shoot and move to minimize risk.

A rocketman did not work alone. An ammo bearer accompanied him and carried extra rockets. The ammo bearer may or may not have been qualified to fire the M9. The ammo bearer was also responsible for loading the missile into the tube's rear while the firer aimed at the target. Firing positions included prone, crouching, and standing. Sometimes both the firer and the ammo bearer carried extra tubes, so they didn't have to waste time re-loading between firings.

Rocketmen and their ammo bearers probably possessed nerves of steel as they fired on advancing enemy armor and machinegun-infested pillboxes. The job was not for the squeamish.

In the case of Mr. Tweed, it seems that Mr. Ditterline was his ammo bearer – at least on occasion.

Mr. Van James Tweed died in 1982 at the age of 67, according to an obituary in *News-Sentinel* (Knoxville, Tenn.). Patsy was listed as one of the surviving family members. A photo of Private Tweed in uniform was located on Ancestry.com.<sup>6</sup>

After compiling this information, I attempted to call Patsy, and emailed her several times hoping for more information. Unfortunately, I was not able to connect with Patsy again. Even still, it is the Foundation's hope that Patsy receives this article and now knows more about what her father did during World War II. The documentation proves that her daddy was one of those amazing men with B Company, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 15<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment and that he served with Audie Murphy.

It also continues our efforts to honor Audie's wish that we do not forget the soldiers he served with – the ones Audie always said were the real heroes.

- *Richard Rodgers*



*Private Van James Tweed, circa 1942-1945. Photo source: Ancestry.com*

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/99665752/van-j-tweed>

**SEVERAL "MORNING REPORTS"**  
**Company B, 1st Battalion, 15th Infantry Regiment**  
**3rd Infantry Division**

**17 November 1944, p.3 of 5**  
(see Line 4 for PFC Van James Tweed)

**4 January 1945, p.1 of 1**  
(see Line 4 for PFC Van James Tweed)

**COMPANY MORNING REPORT** ENDING 2400 17 Nov 1944  
STATION France  
ORGANIZATION Co B 15th Regt Inf

SERIAL NUMBER	NAME	GRADE	CODE
36 765 134	Hardt, Harold E.	Pfc	
34 497 147	Tweed, Van J.	Pfc	
31 216 380	Daley, Daniel J.	Pvt	
31 285 104	DeLaunay, Armand E.	Pvt	
MOC CIO MOS 745			
32 477 710	Gamba, Foster R.	Pfc	
35 228 171	Dohovan, Russell L.	Pvt	
30 343 653	Cresson, Henry B.	Pvt	
245	745		
37 402 205	Brawley, Elmer C.	Pfc	
39 922 432	Hardman, Harry T.	Pvt	
26 801 128	Mireles, Nick W.	Pvt	
745	745		
34 581 576	Miller, George H.	Pfc	
14 000 228	Hinton, Maurice F.	Pvt	
422	745		
39 016 891	Bjordahl, Carroll G.	Pvt	
34 895 166	Blackwelder, Homer D. Jr	Pfc	
36 573 202	Hamer, Le Verne E.	Pfc	
31 409 000	McBarnett, John E.	Pvt	
245	745		
36 467 166	Kekran, Joseph B.	Pvt	

**COMPANY MORNING REPORT** Restricted ENDING 2400 4 Jan 1945  
STATION Chatanooga WY 7564 France  
ORGANIZATION Co B 15th Regt Inf

SERIAL NUMBER	NAME	GRADE	CODE
34 895 361	Smith, Charles W.	Pfc	
trfd in gr to Hq Co 1st Bn this Regt since 3rd			
12 226 478	Hapenas, Frank J.	Pfc	A1
asgd to and jd Co & Regt in gr since 3rd fr 2nd Repl Depot (RTU) per Div SOF 2			
34 497 147	Tweed, Van J.	Pfc	
33 692 278	Wolf, Edward P.	Pvt	A1
above 2 KM asgd to and jd Co & Regt in gr since 3rd fr 2nd Repl Depot (RTU) per Div SOF 2			
33 490 130	Drumheller, Clyde R.	Pfc	J4
39 216 067	Santoford, Harold E.	Pfc	
above 2 KM dy to abs sk ID since 3rd and trfd to D/P 7th Army per Cir 69 87005A			

**Record of events**  
holding and prep pes

OFFICER STRENGTH	PLD & CRPT	ASST	ASST	ASST	ASST	ASST	ASST	ASST	ASST
ASSIGNED									
ATTACHED UNASSIGNED ATTACHED FR OTHER ORGN									
TOTAL									

**ENLISTED MEN**

APN CADET & ENLISTED STRENGTH	PRESENT	ASSENT	ASSENT	ASSENT	ASSENT	ASSENT	ASSENT	ASSENT	ASSENT
ASSIGNED									
ATTACHED UNASSIGNED ATTACHED FR OTHER ORGN									
TOTAL	94	9	103						

Government Morning Reports from B/1-15 Infantry, 3rd Infantry Division, dated 17 November 1944 and 4 January 1945. Both specifically mention Van J. Tweed. Original source: the National Records and Archive Administrator. Contributed by Michael P. West from his private collection.