

Parting Shots: A Buddy's Tribute to Audie Murphy¹ By Bill Mauldin

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Audie Murphy, World War II's most decorated hero, died Memorial weekend in a plane crash. Cartoonist Bill Mauldin pays tribute to his old friend.

AUDIE MURPHY and I traveled the same territory at the same time during World War II, through Sicily, Italy, and France – he as an infantry man and I as an army cartoonist – and I spent some time hanging around the 3rd Division, which he helped make the most decorated outfit in the war. But we didn't meet until five years after the war, and then it was as a pair of celluloid soldiers costarring in John Huston's movie *Red Badge of Courage*.

One day during the filming, Murphy got into trouble with his lines. Playing the part of "The Youth," he was supposed to confess to me, typecast as his buddy,

"The Loud Soldier," that he had run from battle the day before. After many takes, Audie became more and more sullen.



Army Technician 3rd Grade Bill Mauldin, U.S. Army correspondent, during World War II. Original Photo Source: Stars and Stripes

"I can't do it," growled the man who had singlehandedly killed hundreds of German soldiers. "I just can't confess a thing like that to this rear-echelon ink-slinger."

"How about if I confess that I ran away, too?" I suggested.

"I'd like that," Murphy said. So, we rewrote Stephen Crane. In our version, I bared my soul first. Audie then allowed that he, too, had become a mite

¹ Bill Mauldin's article was originally published in the June 11, 1971 issue of *Life Magazine*, p77.

scared – “but only for a minute, mind you.”

Audie Murphy was never able to stop proving himself. He had grown up sharecropping in the south end of Texas, one of 11 kids, son of a father who, according to the son, cut out and a mother who adored the diminutive, pretty face boy and named him Audie, and you can just see him fighting his way to and from school every day. He never let up.

Audie didn't just defend his own honor and manhood. He was ready to defend anybody. One Monday, during the making of our movie, he came on location with his knuckles skinned. He told me he had been driving behind a couple of hardhats who had been buzzed by two kids on motor scooters. The men had tried to run the bikes off the road. Instead, they had found



themselves forced into the ditch by Murphy, who then laid them out with his fists, even though one of them had a hatchet and each outweighed Audie by a good 50 pounds. From their hospital beds,

where the men confirmed the details, they said they had been attacked by a maniac.

Personally, I dug Audie because I too had grown up in the rural Southwest with coal-oil lamps and wind through the walls, where we shot our meat and

could never pay our bills. I shared his terrible need to feel respected, upright and important. However, I was lucky. My furies weren't as burning as his and I was able to work most of them out on paper. Audie took the hard way, cutting a swath through the Wehrmacht and then trying to do the same in Hollywood. There



Audie Murphy as Henry Fleming and Bill Mauldin as Tom Wilson from the 1951 film, *THE RED BADGE OF COURAGE*.

in 20 years as an actor and producer, he found himself outflanked by people he called “phonies” who wouldn’t fight his way. Long before his plane flew into a mountain he was nibbled to death by ducks.

As he grew older, Murphy wanted the world to stay simple so he could

concentrate on tidying up its moral fiber wherever he found himself. But nothing came out right. His country got into wars that heroes couldn’t win. Murphy’s kind of gallantry faced a buyer’s market. He kept walking on the balls of his feet like a wary little bobcat, lonely and angry.

“Long before his plane flew into a mountain he was nibbled to death by ducks”.

Every time he got into trouble which was often because his judgment was on a par with his luck, great numbers of people who knew him rallied to help. This was not because he won those

medals. It was because most of us accept a certain amount of blending as we go along. We adjust,

– *Bill Mauldin*

accept, tolerate, temporize, and sometimes compromise. Not Murphy. In him we all recognize the straight, raw stuff, uncut and fiery as the day it left the still. Nobody wanted to be in his shoes, but nobody wanted to be unlike him either.



Movie still from the 1951 film, RED BADGE OF COURAGE.

WILLIAM “BILL” HENRY MAULDIN was born October 29, 1921, in Mountain Park New Mexico. He joined the New Mexico National Guard – service number 20836470 – with a high school education and was assigned to the Quartermaster Corps. His military registration card characterized him as “Artist, Sculptor, Teachers of Art”.

Mauldin was assigned to the 45th Infantry Division which was federalized two days later. Mauldin worked with the division’s newspaper and was later attached to the *Stars and Stripes* where he created the critically acclaimed cartoon “Willie and Joe”. The cartoon would later earn Mauldin one of two Pulitzer Prizes. Mauldin drew from the common soldier’s perspective making him a foxhole favorite of the enlisted ranks.

Mauldin achieved the rank of Army Technician 3rd grade (E6) by the end of the war. As an army correspondent his battle campaigns include Sicily, Naples-Foggia, Anzio, Rome-Arno, Rhineland, Ardennes-Alsace, and Central Europe. He was awarded the Legion of Merit and the Purple Heart when he was wounded in Italy.

Mauldin co-starred in the 1951 Audie Murphy film RED BADGE OF COURAGE. The pair remained friends until Audie’s death. Mauldin died on January 22, 2003. He was buried in Arlington National Cemetery.

Sources: [National Archives and Records Administration](#) and [Wikipedia](#).

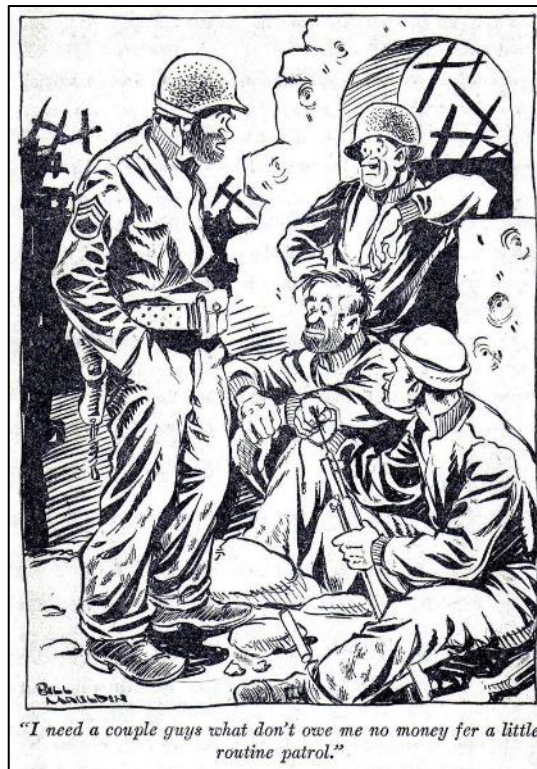
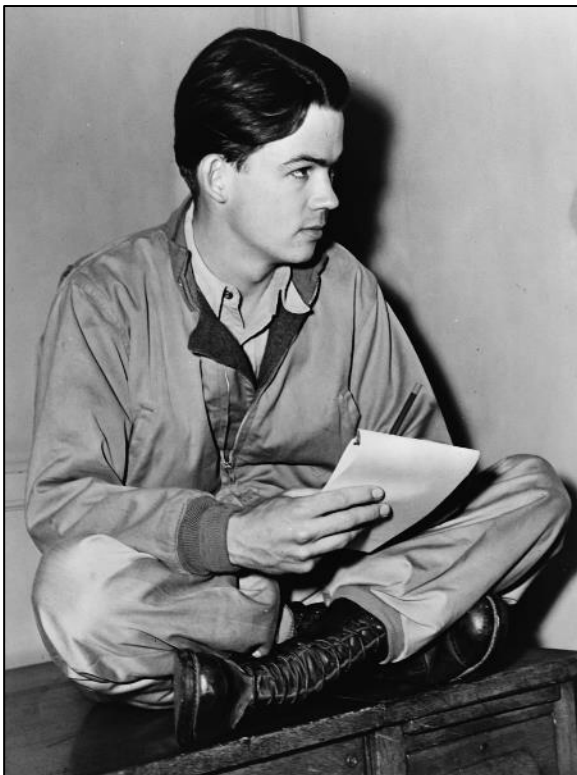


Photo of Bill Mauldin by Fred Palumbo, *New York-World Telegram* staff photographer, source: [Library of Congress](#). Cartoon originally published in the European edition of *Stars and Stripes* newspaper, date unknown.