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*Audie Leon Murphy as himself in To Hell and Back, 1954.  
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# Brother Audie Leon Murphy: From War Hero to Movie Star

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A poor lad from a Texas sharecropper family, grade school dropout, orphaned at sixteen, goes off to war, becomes an acclaimed military hero who then goes on to win fame and fortune in Hollywood. It sounds like the impossible, yet for Audie Murphy it happened. However, if Murphy remained alive today, he would no doubt reluctantly concede that it didn't happen often.

Audie Leon Murphy was born near Kingston in Hunt County, Texas, on June 20, 1924. Although his family was financially poor, his direct ancestors had compiled fine military records in the American Revolution, the War of 1812, and the Civil War. Other kinfolk had fought in the Texas Revolution, Mexican War, and World War I. Besides Audie, two more brothers saw World War II action.

The young Audie Murphy faced a hard scrabble existence. As a song lyric reads "daylight to dark, work's never done, Lord have mercy on a sharecropper's son." The story goes that Audie learned to be a crack shot because the family depended on his hunting for much of their meat supply and money for bullets was so scarce, that a missed shot meant no food on the table.

In 1936 Emmett Murphy deserted his family. Audie quit school and went to work full time as a farm hand. He did whatever had to be done to help his mother and keep the rest of the family together. Then at sixteen his mother, Josie Bell Murphy, died. Audie, the oldest child at home, faced up to the dilemma of placing the younger children in an

orphanage and going to work in the county seat at a combination grocery-service station. When World War II came along, he initially tried to enlist in the Marines, but was rejected for being underweight. Finally, at eighteen, the US Army took him as an infantry man (or boy).

After some months of training at Camp Wolters, Texas and Fort Meade, Maryland; Private Murphy arrived in Casablanca, Morocco, in February 1943, assigned to Company B, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 15<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division. Although Murphy saw little combat action in North Africa, his unit would more than make up for it when the campaigns in Sicily and Italy began. Later he also experienced the war close up in the invasion of Southern France and finally inside Germany.

Audie related his experiences and account of the war in the classic autobiography, *To Hell and Back* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1949). Modestly told, you would hardly know from reading the text that Murphy had emerged from the conflict as the most renowned citizen soldier of his era. Audie earned more medals than anyone else in the army during that war including three Purple Hearts for actions on September 15, 1944, October 26, 1944, and January 25, 1945. His Medal of Honor resulted from actions in France on January 26, 1945. By this time he became a second lieutenant and commanded Company B. His citation concluded Murphy's indomitable courage and his refusal to give an inch of ground saved his company from possible encirclement and destruction,

enabling it to hold the woods which had been the enemy objective.

Audie's original postwar objective had been to go to West Point, but his service related injuries prevented it. He did, however, fulfill his promise to get his younger siblings out of the orphanage and bought a home for older sister Corinne so she could help rear the children.

Audie Murphy's wartime heroics landed his photo on the cover of the July 16, 1945 issue of *Life*. Among those who saw his picture was film star James Cagney, who thought the young soldier had Hollywood potential. Audie, in fact, came to California and stayed for several weeks, but as no offers were forthcoming, he departed. Later he would return and his luck would change. In the meantime, he experienced a triumphant homecoming in his honor, held at Farmersville, Texas, and an Audie Murphy day at Ebbets Field in Brooklyn. He also made a return trip to Europe at the behest of the US Army.

Finally, a Hollywood deal came through. Audie landed a small part in an Alan Ladd-Donna Reed Paramount film titled *Beyond Glory*. In this offering he played the part of a West Point cadet. Murphy had another small role in another picture, *Texas, Brooklyn, and Heaven*. His movie career seemed to be going nowhere until the fall of 1948 when he landed a major role in *Bad Boy*, an Allied Artist feature in which he played a juvenile delinquent who is rehabilitated at a place called "Boy's Ranch" in Texas.

Finally, Murphy's career in Hollywood began to zoom upward. So did his romantic life as he had begun to court and on January 8, 1949 married a young star named Wanda Hendrix, whose petiteness matched Audie's perpetual youthfulness. Universal International offered him a seven-year contract at \$2,500 weekly, and he moved into the starring role in *The Kid from Texas*, another film in a long list of movies about Billy the Kid. He then costarred with Wanda in another western titled *Sierra*. However, by the time the picture was

released in June 1950, the couple's marriage was headed for the divorce courts in the manner of many show business linkages.

After another western titled *Kansas Raiders*, in which he portrayed Jesse James, Audie, on loan to MGM, starred as Henry Fleming in *The Red Badge of Courage*, an adaptation of Stephen Crane's Civil War novel. More than his previous films this boosted his stature as an actor. As one critic wrote "Audie Murphy gives a sensitive performance, wonderfully conveying...the fall...of a man in combat." Universal followed this success by placing their star in eight consecutive westerns, the most notable being *Destry*, the third Hollywood rendition of Max Brand's famed novel, *Destry Rides Again*. Meanwhile, on April 23, 1951, Audie married again to Pamela Archer, a former airline stewardess. This union endured and produced two children, Terry and James (nicknamed Skipper), on March 14, 1952 and March 23, 1954 respectively.

By 1954 one could conclude that Audie had achieved stardom, albeit he was being increasingly typecast in westerns. That fall he began filming his own story, *To Hell and Back*, which turned out to be Universal's biggest hit up to that time. Premiering in August 1955 in four Texas cities, the film quickly began to set attendance records and grossed some ten million in its initial theatrical release. He also made some ten percent of the net profits on the picture, which totaled up to some \$387,000 through October 1966. Prior to the release of his film autobiography, Murphy starred in a boxing picture titled *The World in His Corner* with Barbara Rush. However, the public seemed to prefer their hero either in westerns or war movies (or a combination of both). He did a different type of western in *Walk the Proud Land*, the story of Apache Indian agent, John Clum, who pioneered in encouraging self-government on reservations. A military comedy, *Joe Butterfly*, set in postwar Japan represented



**Audie Murphy as John P. Clum in *Walk the Proud Land*, 1956.**

Murphy's only effort in a humorous mode, although several of his westerns had their lighter moments.

Meanwhile, Audie Leon Murphy had begun his Masonic journeys by joining North Hollywood Lodge No. 542. He was initiated an Entered Apprentice February 14, 1955; passed to the degree of Fellowcraft on April 4 1955; and was Raised a Master Mason on June 27, 1955. On May 14, 1956, he became a plural member of Heritage Lodge No. 764, also in North Hollywood. He retained membership for the rest of his life.

Murphy had purchased a home in Dallas in the early fifties although he never lived in it on a regular basis. He did continue his Masonic endeavors there completing his Scottish Rite degrees in Dallas on November 14, 1957. In October 1965 he received the KCCH and less than two months before his death moved his Scottish Rite membership to the Valley of Long Beach, California.

Audie Murphy's movie career continued to move forward in the later fifties as the older B pictures had faded into the past and "adult westerns dominated the television screens; the former war hero ranked among the few remaining cowboy film stars. Among his more memorable efforts from this period are *The Guns of Fort Petticoat* with Kathryn

Grant (Crosby), *Night Passage* in which he costarred with the late James Stewart, and *The Wild and The Innocent*, where he portrayed a trapper who pursued dance hall queen Joanne Dru and was in turn pursued by the youthful teen star, Sandra Dee, who eventually got her man.

Murphy also had a brief fling with television adult westerns by starring in a series about the introduction of more modern police methods in Denver titled *Whispering Smith*. Twenty-six shows were filmed, but the series lasted through only thirteen of them. It was aired on the NBC Network in mid-1961.

Although his TV series did not endure, Audie's motion picture career continued to do well through the mid-sixties. The decade began with the release of *Hell Bent for Leather* in February 1960, a film that also starred Felicia Farr and Stephen McNally, the latter playing the part of a trigger-happy law officer who pursues Murphy in a case of mistaken identity. He did non-westerns in that era, another World War II drama, *Battle at Bloody Beach*, in 1961, and *Trunk to Cairo* in 1965. However, cowboy films remained his main bread-and-butter. Among his more notable pictures from this time are included *Posse from Hell* (1960), *Six Black Horses* (1962), *Gunfight at Comanche Creek* (1963), and *Bullet for a Badman* (1964). A Murphy film that might be of some interest to Masons, *Gunpoint* (1965), featured two other noted members of the fraternity, Edgar Buchanan and Royal Dano, in strong support roles.

Murphy also made something of a name for himself as a songwriter. Roy Clark, Eddy Arnold, and Jimmy Dean were among those who recorded his efforts. His best known composition, co-authored with Scott Turner, was "Shutters and Boards," which made the Pop Top 30 for Jerry Wallace in 1963 and the Country Top 30 for Slim Whitman in 1970.

From 1965, Audie Murphy's movie career began to fade. He made a pair of films for Columbia, *The Texan* (1966), and *40 Guns to Apache Pass* (1967), the former of which was



**Audie Murphy in *40 Guns to Apache Pass*, 1966.**

shot near Barcelona, Spain. In 1969 the one-time war hero tried his hand at producing in a picture titled *A Time for Dying*, in which Hollywood veteran Budd Boetticher did the directing. Audie himself had a small role. However, the production was never really finished, and the producer was still trying to raise funds to complete the picture at the time of his untimely death.

Audie Murphy died in a plane crash on May 28, 1971 near Galax, Virginia. Some days elapsed before the bodies were recovered. He was buried in Arlington National Cemetery on June 7, 1971. Future President George Bush was numbered among those who attended his funeral. Two years later his country honored him by naming the Audie L. Murphy Memorial Veteran's Hospital in San Antonio, Texas for him. In 1996 his movie contributions received recognition with his induction into the "Hall of Great Western Performers" at the National Cowboy Hall of Fame in Oklahoma City. His pictures are shown regularly on TV, and several are available on videocassette. Like Sergeant Alvin York from World War I, Audie Leon

Murphy has become the personification of the heroic citizen soldier. On top of these achievements, Brother Murphy needs to be remembered as one of the most distinguished Masons of his era.

*Note: There are two biographies of Audie Murphy, Harold B. Simpson's Audie Murphy: American Soldier (Hillsboro, TX, Hill College Press, 1975) is out of print; while Sue Gossett's The Films and Career of Audie Murphy (Madison, NC: Empire Publishing, Inc. 1966) remains available. For Murphy's Masonic record I am indebted to Grand Secretary David L. Dresser of the Grand Lodge of Ohio, and to John Cooper II, Grand Secretary of the Grand Lodge of California, and staff member Eileen M. Irby. His Scottish Rite record was researched by A. & A.S.R., S.J. Librarian Joan Sansbury. Thanks to my student aid Miss Abby Gail Goodnite for preparation of this manuscript and editing advice. One may also wish to consult the Audie Murphy Research Foundation at 18008 Saratoga Way, Suite 516, Santa Clarita, California 91351.*



**Grave of Audie Leon Murphy in Arlington National Cemetery.**

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