

“WARRIORS: EXTRAORDINARY TALES FROM THE BATTLEFIELD”
2005 - Chapter 11 - Pp 239-257

Hollywood Hero

By Max Hastings

IT IS A SCENE depicted in scores of low-budget movies produced during the twenty years after World War II ended: on a shell-torn hillside, a GI pokes up his head as a group of Germans offer surrender. He is shot. His body rolls back into the arms of his buddy, who stares at it for a few moments in shocked disbelief. Then, boyish features frozen into a mask of determination, the surviving soldier grasps his carbine and charges single-handed at the German machinegun positions, shooting and grenading until every treacherous kraut lies dead. Then he stands numb and drained amid the carnage as the rest of his platoon belatedly advance to join him. They stare warily at this lonely figure, half awed and half appalled by a display of suicidal courage they know they cannot match.

This is a Hollywood caricature of war, acted out many times by John Wayne and his kind. The scene features prominently in the 1955 movie *To Hell and Back*, with Audie Murphy playing the angry GI. The star was not much of an actor. His chief assets on screen were the baby-faced good looks of an all-American boy, which kept fans happy through his appearances in twenty-five years of cheap westerns. His performance in *To Hell and Back* is wooden and one-dimensional. As the young soldier, he views shot-blasted battlefields with the sort of dismay a dutiful schoolboy might show, gazing upon a classroom trashed by a cluster of delinquents. In scenes behind the lines, amid bar girls in seedy Italian clip joints, he looks as embarrassed as he deserves to be. Violins dominate the musical score. No cliché of soldiers dialogue is omitted from the script. A film critic might say that Ronald Reagan

could play this sort of corny stuff better than Murphy did.

Yet there is a profound pathos about Audie Murphy and the war film in which he starred. It was based upon his own experience of combat. When the Second World War ended, he was probably only nineteen, at most twenty - his birth date is uncertain, and seems to have been falsified to enable him to enlist under age. Yet he had become the most decorated American soldier of the conflict. Again and again in a succession of actions in Italy and France he displayed his courage in the face of the enemy. He possessed extraordinary qualities as a fighting infantryman, not least an eagerness to return to duty after being wounded three times. He cherished some notions of becoming a career soldier, but abandoned these when his fame attracted the attention of James Cagney, who was responsible for bringing him to Hollywood and launching him on a career in films. In 1948 the heavily-ghosted memoir of his war experiences, *To Hell and Back*, became a best-seller, which led in turn to the film in which he so uncomfortably played himself. For all Murphy's celebrity, happiness and fulfillment eluded him. He was painfully conscious of his paucity of acting talent. It is difficult to be unmoved by the history of a man who contributed so much as a wartime soldier, yet found it impossible to parley military achievement into any rapprochement in himself.

Murphy was born into a dirt-poor sharecropper's family in Hunt County, Texas, probably in June 1925. One of twelve children of whom nine survived into adulthood, he gained little schooling before his

despairing father abandoned their home. Audie's class-mates mocked him as 'short-breeches', because his only pair of trousers shrank with relentless washing. After the fifth grade he embarked on several teenage years of casual labour - cotton-picking, selling newspapers, working in a gas station. His mother died of heart disease in 1941, and most of his siblings disappeared into orphanages. He himself had shown an early interest in the possibility of becoming a soldier. One of the few positive influences upon his childhood was a local World War I veteran who enthused the boy with his reminiscences. The US Army was a familiar refuge for young Southerners lacking money or education. When America entered the war in December 1941, Murphy sought to enlist. He was rejected by both the Marines and the paratroops. This was unsurprising, since he stood five feet five inches tall, and weighed just 112 pounds. The army eventually accepted him in June 1942, aged eighteen on his record, probably seventeen in reality. After training at Camp Wolters, Texas, 'Baby', as he was initially nicknamed by comrades, was shipped overseas. In February 1943 he joined B Company of the 1/15th Infantry in North Africa as a replacement.

A reserved man all his life, beneath an iron mask of self-control it was plain that Murphy nursed a lot of anger, as well he might. From the outset of his military career he showed a determination to succeed as a soldier, and also a satisfaction in finding something he could belong to - the platoon. For the first time and perhaps last time, here was a group amidst which he felt at home. Loyalty to the handful of men among whom he served was among the most striking features of his wartime career. Again and again he refused opportunities and promotions that might cause him to be separated from them. Almost at the outset, an officer troubled by his slight figure and boyish features sought to make Murphy a headquarters runner rather

than a rifleman, but the young soldier was having none of it. He remained in the same unit from beginning to end, until he became almost the sole survivor of the band which had mustered in North Africa.

Murphy had to wait some months before first experiencing action in July 1943, following the invasion of Sicily. Most soldiers in a theatre of war are willing to do what is asked of them, but are careful not to seek additional hazards. Murphy's eagerness to join patrols and take point during advances, together with an obvious dexterity with weapons, earned him a rapid promotion to corporal. He joined the Italian campaign with the US 3rd Division, landing near Salerno, and was committed to a series of battles around the Volturno River. Encountering Germans on a night patrol, after a firefight he and his men took over in a quarry. The enemy pursued them, but were halted by American fire which killed three men and caused the others to surrender. This action earned Murphy a sergeant's stripes.

A bout of malaria put him into hospital for the Anzio landing. Like many other infantrymen in the same predicament, when discharged he fiercely resisted efforts to send him as a replacement to a new regiment. He insisted upon rejoining the 15th Infantry, committed to heavy fighting in the beachhead. Murphy sought the front constantly, and became well-known for his enthusiasm for seeking out the enemy alone, stalking and killing Germans wherever he could find them. He earned his first Bronze Star for leading a night patrol to destroy with Molotov cocktails and rifle grenades a damaged tank which the Germans were striving to repair. Another attack of malaria sent him back to a field hospital for ten days, but he returned in time to join the advance on Rome late in May 1944. Offered a battlefield commission, he declined lest he should be obliged to leave his platoon, which whom he shared a disappointing leave

in the Italian capital after its liberation: 'We prowl through Rome like ghosts', he wrote later, 'finding no satisfaction in anything we see or do. I feel like a man briefly reprieved from death; and there is no joy within me. We can have no hope until the war is ended. Thinking of the men on the fighting fronts, I grow lonely on the streets of Rome.'

Murphy was a grave young man, who embraced responsibility and seemed happy to accept it on behalf of others less ardent. He fulfilled the hardest duty of a soldier in combat: he was willing to engage the enemy even when logic and instinct incited more normal men to seek shelter or to flee. Murphy claimed to be as vulnerable to fear as any of his comrades. This was patently untrue, though his excellent tactical judgment helped him to keep his nerve when others lost it. He demonstrated a gift for judging a combat situation, assessing whether holding a position or moving forward was in reality as perilous as the sound and fury of battle persuaded other men that it was: 'Experience helps. You soon learn that a situation is seldom as black as the imagination paints it. Some always get through.'

As an undersized boy, Murphy was a feisty classroom fighter who taught himself to repress visible emotion. 'I'm not the crying kind,' he told an army nurse, and there is no reason to disbelieve him. His loyalty to his platoon seemed almost obsessive: 'As long as there's a man in the line, maybe I feel that my place is up there beside him.' For all his unimpressive physique, he possessed a natural authority, enforced by cool, piercing eyes. Instinctively at home with weapons, he handled every kind of infantry small arms with assurance. He suffered not the slightest hesitation, such as was commonplace among citizen soldiers, about killing his fellow man. Most combatants seldom fired their rifles in action, and rarely hit anything when they did so. 'Murph' always fired, often effectively.

His platoon had the equivocal feelings about him which soldiers usually display towards zealous warriors - they respected his courage, but feared that it might prove excessively dangerous to the interests of others.

Murphy cut a lonely figure, a man who seldom received a letter from home at mail call, because he knew few people who might care to write. He was the sort of soldier whom commanding officers cherish, because they need them to win battles. A distinguished American World War II infantry officer wrote: 'A few guys carry your attack, and the rest of the people sort of participate and arrive on the objective shortly after everybody else.' This is an important truth. Likewise another veteran, Colonel William DePuy: 'The average man, like nine out of ten, does not have an instinct for the battlefield, doesn't relish it, and will not act independently except under direct orders.' Audie Murphy, it was plain to all those who observed him in action, was the one man in ten, indeed the one in a thousand, even if his exceptionality caused a 3rd Division officer later to observe enigmatically that the young hero 'was not the most admired guy in the world.' Such is usually the case with any soldier, sailor or airman vulnerable to the charge of being a 'gong-chaser.' Murphy's behavior created some of the same discomfort among comrades as did that of Guy Gibson in the Royal Air Force.

The baby-faced sergeant won a Distinguished Service Cross during an advance up an enemy-held hillside near the town of Ramatuelle on 15 August 1944, the day of the Anvil landings in southern France. Three hours after crossing the beach south of St. Tropez, his battalion was driven to the ground by German machine-gun fire as they neared a ridge crest. Murphy's platoon was moved forward from reserve to seek a new line of approach. Soon it too was pinned down. Perceiving that the enemy was out of range of carbines and grenades, on his own

initiative Murphy crawled back downhill to the heavy-weapons platoon, borrowed a .30 calibre machine-gun, returned with Private Lattie Tipton to find a firing position, and quickly killed two of the defending Germans. Having exhausted his single belt of .30 calibre ammunition, he and Tipton charged and overran one enemy trench with carbines and grenades. A German soldier in a nearby foxhole waved a white flag. Tipton rose to accept his surrender, and was at once shot dead. He was Murphy's closest friend in the army. Enraged, Murphy picked up a German MG42 machine-gun lying at his feet and charged along the hillside, throwing grenades with his free hand. One by one, and entirely alone, he destroyed a succession of enemy positions, killing thirteen Germans. The rest of the unit, at whom he had been shouting curses and imprecations to follow him, then advanced to occupy the ridgeline.

After months of stagnation first in Italian mud and then dust, the American invaders of southern France exulted in the swift dash up the Rhone Valley. Murphy wrote: 'We experience great exhilaration, for there is nothing so good for the morale of the foot soldier as progress.' Late in August a shell fragment which nicked his heel cost Murphy two weeks in hospital. By now all the men of his platoon with whom he had found comradeship in North Africa and Italy were gone - wounded or dead. He forged no new close relationship with their successors. He was widely perceived as a soldier fighting a war of his own: 'So many men have come and gone that I can no longer keep track of them . . . I have isolated myself as much as possible, desiring only to do my work and be left alone. I feel burnt out, emotionally and physically exhausted. Let the hill be strewn with corpses so long as I do not have to turn over the bodies and find the familiar face of a friend.' Within days of returning to his unit from hospital Murphy led a patrol into a German ambush which pinned down his men. He crawled

round to a flank, then charged alone with grenades and sub-machine-gun, destroying the enemy ambush party. He received a Silver Star for this action. Three days later, several of his men were shot down in a similar surprise encounter. Murphy worked his way forward until he could see the German positions, then directed artillery and mortar fire by radio until the enemy retired with substantial casualties. This action, too, earned him a Silver Star.

A cynic might suggest that the US Army had by now identified a story-book hero, and heaped decorations on him with extravagant enthusiasm. Other men did as much on the battlefield, yet their deeds went unremarked, or were rewarded with a single medal. The US 3rd Division, a good formation which paid heavily in casualties for its repeated commitment to combat, was uncommonly generous in recommending awards - 11.6 percent of all the US Army's wartime Medals of Honor were awarded to men from its ranks. Yet there is no reason to doubt the facts of each action for which Murphy was honoured. The American and British armies in northwest Europe suffered chronic difficulty because many of their infantry units were sluggish in attack. On encountering even small numbers of enemy, it was a habitual vice of Eisenhower's foot soldiers to halt and call down artillery and mortar fire, accepting a delay of hours or even days, rather than to launch a quick, bold infantry assault. By contrast, here was Sergeant Audie Murphy, again and again offering demonstrations straight out of the infantry manual which, had they been widely emulated, would have won the war months sooner. Who can be surprised that senior officers were eager to highlight such a man? And who can deny that Murphy's courage merited the applause which it received?

At last he accepted a battlefield commission, becoming commander of the platoon

with which he had served since North Africa. On 26 October he was seriously wounded in the hip by a sniper's bullet. As is often the way in war, however skilful the soldier, Murphy suffered his most grievous injury when taken by surprise, in a situation in which his prowess counted for nothing. He merely overtaxed his luck. Many hours elapsed before he reached a field hospital. The wound turned gangrenous, and he was obliged to spend three dreary and often painful months enduring treatment and recuperation, his life saved by penicillin. 'These Krauts are getting to be better shots than they used to be or else my luck's playing out on me,' he wrote ruefully from his bed. 'I guess some day they will tag me for keeps.'

Had he wished, he could have gone home to the United States with his medals and his wounds. Instead, by January 1945 he was back with his battalion in Alsace, participating in the battle of the Colmar Pocket. On 26 January he was commanding his company, every other officer having been killed in unsuccessful attacks. The 15th Infantry were once again preparing to advance near the village of Holtzwihr when the Germans launched a counter-attack with tanks and foot soldiers. Murphy ordered his heavily outnumbered men to pull back, but himself remained in his position to direct artillery fire. As the Germans came on, the lieutenant noticed an American tank destroyer on fire nearby. The armoured M-10 had been abandoned by its crew after they rashly ignored Murphy's warning not to expose themselves, and had suffered the consequences. A .50 calibre machine-gun stood loaded and idle on the hull mounting. Murphy ran forward seized the gun and began pouring fire into the approaching German infantry. Some attackers were later found dead within a few yards of his position. For an hour he maintained his defense despite a leg wound after two further German hits on the tank destroyer, and with flames surging around

him. Only when his ammunition was exhausted did he slip back to rejoin the men of his company, who had been awed spectators of this performance from the comparative safety of a forest two hundred yards to the rear. He led them forward once more against the battered and dispirited Germans, who turned in retreat. Murphy then collapsed. For the Holtzwihr episode he was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor, together with the Legion of Merit for his achievements throughout the campaign.

This very young man was not unreasonably thrilled by his deluge of decorations. After hearing that he was to receive the Medal of Honor, he wrote home: 'since that is all the medals they have to offer I'll have to take it easy for a while.' First Lieutenant Murphy was henceforward considered too precious a commodity to be allowed to continue in service with a rifle company. After a leave in Paris, somewhat to his dismay he spent the last weeks of the campaign as a liaison officer. Though he often found excuses to explore the forward areas, the war was almost won. He was denied any further authorized combat role.

Murphy had become the epitome of the American hero. In the aftermath of VE-Day, the army and his fellow-countrymen hastened to celebrate his achievement. *Life* magazine featured him on its cover. Absurd calculations were made about the number of Germans this one-man task force had personally killed, wounded or captured. European governments added their own garlands to the symbolic liberator's collection - Lieutenant Murphy was finally entitled to wear twenty-eight medals. From Paris, on 10 June 1945, he was among the very first Americans to be flown home.

Yet what was home? He had left the Lone Star state less than three years earlier as a nobody who knew almost no one. 'Who would have expected Shorty to be anything more than another kid from Texas?' mused an

old acquaintance. Murphy evinced a stab of disgust about the fashion in which both his local towns, McKinney and Greenville, which had treated the threadbare orphan with disdain three years earlier, now fought to claim him. Everybody wanted to meet and shower praise upon the absurdly handsome, apparently diffident hero. When he went to a barber's shop for a haircut a crowd gathered outside, peering fascinated through the window at the young god.

But here, once again, was a familiar problem for commanders: what was to be done with the successful warrior? He had no education, and indeed no great intellect. Most of the comrades whom he had known - in some cases loved - were dead. He appeared without vices, yet possessed only one demonstrable skill: he could fight. Continuing pain from his hip wound made it improbable that he should continue a combat career in the army, even if new enemies could be found for him to kill. He was too deficient in the qualities of a team player to seem a future general. On 21 September 1945, immensely famous yet with no fixed abode or future, Audie Murphy was discharged from military service.

It was a sight of the photograph on the *Life* cover which convinced the superstar James Cagney that this boy could make it in movies: 'I saw that Audie could be photographed well from any angle, and I figured that a guy with drive enough to take him that far in the war had drive enough to become a star.' Murphy at first ignored a cable from Cagney in Hollywood, seeking a meeting. When at last they got together, the star - who was exactly Murphy's height - enthused: 'Dignity from within! Not the kind imposed upon you from without. Spiritual overtones. He looks like Huckleberry Finn grown up. No, not really grown up. There's something in those eyes that is as old as death and yet as young as springtime.' Cagney put

the grave young veteran on a salary and a personal contract, then spent some time studying his man to decide how best to make an actor of him. For a year Murphy lodged in Cagney's Beverly Hills pool house. The star decided against any formal training, but employed a dance instructor to teach the young war veteran to walk gracefully. He noted that Murphy had an excellent memory and remarkable powers of observation, but not much else. He persuaded him, somewhat unwillingly, to read aloud to an empty room, to strengthen his speaking voice.

The Texan farm boy found all this pretty dispiriting. Again and again he was tempted to throw in his hand. Acutely conscious of his disqualifications to become a public performer, he wrote to a friend: 'James Cagney is trying to teach me show business, but I'm afraid he doesn't have much to work with.' The star and his protégé eventually fell out and parted company, for reasons neither ever discussed and which remain a matter for speculation. It was widely acknowledged in Hollywood that Murphy traveled with demons, and it was generally assumed that these derived from his war experiences. There was much talk, as well there might be, about his insistence upon sleeping with a pistol under his pillow, sometimes waking from nightmares to fire it at an unoffending cupboard or mirror. That the demons existed is undoubted, but it seems reasonable to suppose that they predated Murphy's war experiences.

Resigned to attempting to make a success of Hollywood, for a time he attended drama classes, but quit disgusted by what he perceived as the left-wing attitudes he encountered there. Exponents of a wide range of political causes sought in vain to recruit the hero for their own purposes. Murphy found it impossible to take seriously drama exercises such as pretending to sew up an imaginary pair of gloves. He adopted the customary Beverly Hills panacea for trauma by visiting a

psychiatrist. Asked how their meetings went, Murphy responded with laconic wit: 'He went off to see his psychiatrist.' The aspirant actor fell in with an alcoholic screenwriter of intellectual pretensions named David 'Spec' McClure, who became his cultural mentor and launched him - with indifferent success - upon a programme of self-education.

It was plain to most people who encountered Audie that he was a psychological mess of epic proportions. He met and married a beautiful starlet named Wanda Hendrix, then lived with her through a few sad years in which his career prospered while hers sagged. She found it hard to live with his tensions, expressed in chronic stomach disorders. He once told her that in action he had seen the face of his own father in that of every German soldier he killed. She grew to perceive that he was a gloomy, tormented soul: 'Audie's worst fault is his pessimism,' she said. He had no sustaining core of values or self-belief, and as a result was fearful of dropping his defenses in relationships with either sex. There was a chronic melancholy, apparent to all who knew him well. He lived on the shortest of fuses, once shooting a light switch amid his midnight torments, wading into fist fights with men rash enough to challenge him. He was sometimes seen by his wife holding a loaded gun to his own mouth. 'He played with death as if it were a toy,' Hendrix told Spec McClure. It surprised no one when the marriage ended in divorce in 1950.

Yet Murphy possessed two qualities that could, and did, carry him a long way in the Hollywood of the late 1940s and the 1950s: looks and charm. He swiftly graduated from a big part in a 1949 West Point courtroom drama, *Beyond Glory* - 'I had eight words in the script, seven more than I could handle' - to bigger things. In 1949 he starred as William Bonney, Billy the Kid, in *The Kid from Texas*. This part convinced him that his future lay in Westerns - 'oaters' in the jargon of

the trade. He had exactly the gifts to convince an audience that he was, indeed, the lonely gunfighter of legend. By a notable irony, however, in order to fulfill his screen destiny the kid from Texas had to acquire some essential skills, prominent among them that of riding a horse. There had been no money for horses in a Hunt County childhood. His war wounds troubled him constantly: he was in discomfort in the saddle, and in pain when he fell out of it. Yet here, true grit prevailed. He turned himself into a fine horseman. Filming as Billy the Kid, on the first day his stunt double broke his collarbone. Thereafter, Murphy did almost all his own stunt work on the picture.

Willard Willingham, who later took up a role as Murphy's stunt double when one was needed, also became his personal assistant and closest friend. Willingham later said: 'He was pretty strange in those days. He was difficult for everyone.' A man of natural good manners who recoiled from coarse behavior, Murphy had no patience with people who offended his own sense of propriety, not least in their choice of language. He was sometimes heard to lacerate erring crew members on set. Those who worked with him learned to be wary of his notorious temper.

Murphy went on to make some forty Western pictures. For all his limitations, he became a star of his day. 'Audie could learn the lines and hit his marks. Anything else about acting was a mystery to him,' remarked a fellow performer. Critics noted that he could never be a convincing ensemble player, because on screen he always looked what he was - a man apart, a man alone. Even among a screen cluster of cowboys, never for a moment did Murphy seem a credible member of a gang. Yet none of this mattered to the public, who idolized the handsome kid with the steady, hurt eyes, whose wartime achievements they never forgot. Whatever Murphy's insecurities in other departments he was

sufficiently assured of his own courage to be unafraid sometimes to play cowards on celluloid. From 1949 onwards his celebrity was increased by the publication of his war memoir, ghosted by Spec McClure.

The battlefield feats recorded under Murphy's name in *To Hell and Back* are a matter of record. However, most of the book consists of reported dialogue between the soldier and his platoon. It will always be a matter for speculation how far these are fictionalized. The tone is half-right, but the text sometimes attributes implausible reflective powers to Murphy the young infantryman. The book is laden with cliché, of a kind which suggest the voice of McClure rather than that of the nominal author. Here was no Frederic Manning - though both men fought, and lost, bitter battles with publishers whom they sought to convince that no soldiers' dialogue could be credible without its blasphemies and obscenities. Murphy himself never disowned the book - how could he? - But he was outspokenly critical of the subsequent film, which he considered a betrayal of the soldiers among whom he served. It is a preposterous notion that any man could convincingly re-enact on celluloid feats which he himself had performed on the battlefield. Murphy cringed before the studio copy on the movie posters: 'Just a kid too young to shave . . . but old enough to win every medal his country had to give.'

In the Hollywood of that period men were expected to die apparently bloodlessly on screen. Murphy remembered all too vividly the reality of severed limbs, mangled torsos, bare bones and dangling intestines. He fought in vain to toughen the bowdlerized script dialogue. He understood, as the film makers had no desire to understand, that courage is displayed in war against a backdrop of almost unbridled squalor and sorrow. The detachment he displays on screen as the star of *To Hell and Back* hints at the disgust about the

whole venture which he freely acknowledged off set.

The screen role of which he remained most proud was that of Fleming, another young soldier, in John Huston's 1951 film of Stephen Crane's *Red Badge of Courage*. Critics were unimpressed by the movie, yet Murphy - on whose casting Huston insisted, against the strong wishes of the studio, MGM - was able to play an infantryman of the American Civil War period suffering experiences at least as harrowing as his own with a conviction he could not bring to a portrayal of himself. Murphy's career as an actor, if not as a star, was fatally flawed by a resistance to masquerade or self-revelation. His own being was rooted in a painful, even exaggerated, sense of reality. He found it impossible to throw himself convincingly into the fantasies contrived by directors and screenwriters. He felt a disdain for actors who had not served in the wartime armed forces, and showed it. Many of them responded in kind, by spurning Murphy. Kirk Douglas thought him 'a vicious little guy.' After a serious falling out with Tony Curtis, Murphy never spoke to the star again. He saved his admiration for the relatively few Hollywood figures such as James Stewart, Lee Marvin and Clark Gable who had served their country in uniform.

After his separation from Wanda Hendrix, Murphy told Spec McClure that he would live a hermit's life: 'I'll be the poor man's Howard Hughes.' Four days after he won his divorce decree, however, he married a Texan girl named Pamela Archer, with whom he had two sons whom he adored. The couple were soon living apart. Murphy embarked upon a long succession of casual liaisons - a familiar pastime for Hollywood stars, but one which he pursued with an almost inhuman detachment. He spent many hours alone, even on movie sets. An actor who worked with him on *Gunfight at Comanche Creek* (1963) and

Arizona Raiders (1965) said: 'He always looked as if he'd rather be somewhere else.' His contempt for his own thespian skills never diminished, but he developed sufficient confidence in his powers as a box-office draw to impose his will on set. He made himself seem foolish by declaring one day that he wanted to raise his game, to play in screen adaptations of Ibsen and Dostoyevsky. The nearest he came to attempting such pinnacles was to play the lead opposite Michael Redgrave in a disastrously misconceived 1957 production of Graham Greene's novel *The Quiet American*.

The film was chiefly shot on location in Vietnam, which was enjoying an interval of relative tranquility between the French war with the Vietminh and the American war with the Vietcong. By now Murphy was past thirty - far older than that in experience, still absurdly younger in looks. Neither he nor Redgrave was first choice for their parts, which were intended for Montgomery Clift and Laurence Olivier. Redgrave, a veteran British actor who represented the highest standards of his profession on stage and screen, recoiled in disgust from Murphy's approach to acting after hearing the Texas shrug, 'It beats picking cotton.' Murphy, in his turn, knew nothing of Redgrave's reputation, and plainly cared little for the bisexual Englishman. He did not enjoy his weeks in Saigon's thick, clammy, hundred-degree temperatures. He contracted appendicitis and had to be rushed to hospital in Hong Kong, at vast cost in delays to the production. One scene in the movie required him to carry an injured Redgrave out of danger during a firefight in paddy fields. Redgrave was a big, heavy man. For Murphy, with his slight frame and war wounds, the experience of supporting him was an agony; intensified when a retake was needed.

During his convalescence from the appendix operation, Murphy made the grave mistake of reading Graham Greene's novel on

which the film was based. Brooding about its contemptuous anti-Americanism, he was tempted to refuse to return to the set. Murphy the patriot was disgusted by the novelist's cynicism. 'Green never met a real American, I think. He believes a guy who goes to Harvard and lives in Boston is a real American. Did you ever meet anyone from Boston who went to Harvard? They all come from anyplace but . . .' In Saigon, Murphy was made deeply unhappy by the army of child street beggars. 'There's always children,' he told Spec McClure wearily, recalling Naples and Rome. 'The children grow up and become soldiers. And somebody gets the soldiers together and declares a war. So the soldiers cripple and kill each other until one side hollers "Uncle." Then people ring bells, blow whistles and talk about how great peace is for a while. But new children come along, new soldiers, new wars.' If these were banal sentiments, there is no reason to doubt their sincerity.

The film's interior sequences were shot in Rome, from which Murphy several times revisited Anzio, scene of some of his most brutal wartime experiences. His wife Pamela, whom he seems to have made no effort to contact during his months in Asia, also made the Anzio trip with him. Shooting of *The Quiet American* was completed on 4 June 1957, thirteen years almost to the day since Murphy had first entered Rome as a young GI. He was thirty-two or thirty-three according to army records. His movie career was already slipping downhill, though it would stumble on for a few more years. He appeared in forty-four films in all, and saved none of the money from them. He was chronically careless, indeed reckless, about his finances, a regular and unlucky gambler. He went bankrupt when a business venture failed.

Murphy found himself wholly out of step with the new world of the 1960s, and above all with the protest movement against the war in Vietnam. He himself was a product

of an earlier era and a different ethic, in which any decent man's actions were governed by loyalty to his country's chosen causes. He found his reputation borrowed in disturbing circumstances when Lieutenant William Calley of the American Division, the officer held responsible for the 1968 My Lai massacre, testified after his atrocities were exposed: 'We thought we would go to Vietnam and be Audie Murphys. Kick in the door. Run in the hooch, give it a good burst - kill. And get a big kill ratio in Vietnam.' To those who wished Murphy well, it was embarrassing enough that such a soldier as Calley should cite his example. Matters became worse, however, when Murphy himself observed staunchly that he thought Calley guilty of nothing worse than a military misjudgment. The star-hero's achievements of which 1945 America had been so proud, the killing of Germans in industrial quantities, for which he was rewarded with a chest full of decorations and the applause of his country, inspired much more equivocal responses from a new generation. What kind of man was this who could have taken life so readily at his country's bidding, and who displayed no apparent misgivings about the murderous task of a soldier? Murphy faced further embarrassing publicity in 1970, when he was indicted for the attempted murder of a dog trainer at whom he had allegedly fired a pistol. He was acquitted for lack of evidence, but was quizzed outside the courtroom by reporters about whether he had indeed let off a gun at the man. 'If I had,' said Murphy defiantly, 'do you think I would have missed?' Everyone knew that whatever the truth of this episode, the star possessed a dark and unhealthy obsession with firearms.

Murphy's relationships with studio executives, never cordial, were not assisted when word got around of a remark he made one day in the 1960s, when visiting the Universal lot to discuss a new movie. As he was gazing thoughtfully at a cluster of studio executives, somebody asked what was on his

mind. He responded: 'I was just thinking that with one hand grenade, a person could get rid of all those no-talent bastards at one stroke.'

Murphy failed in his oft-expressed ambition to find some means of achieving financial security without continuing to make third-rate Westerns. By the end of the 1960s the third-rate Western era was about through, and so was Murphy's box-office appeal. He was killed in a light plane crash in fog at Roanoke, Virginia, on 28 May 1971, aged forty-five or forty-six. It is hard to feel that death deprived him of anything he valued. His lavish funeral at Arlington National Cemetery flouted the wishes expressed in his 1965 will that he should be buried without ceremony, and especially without any military presence. He wanted to lie anywhere save at Arlington, he said. Yet even if America's relationship with its former hero had grown uneasy, at his death the nation was determined to reclaim possession of Audie Murphy.

Spec McClure recorded a conversation with Murphy in the 1950s in which he said: 'I have a deadly hatred of fear. It has me by the throat, and I have it by the throat. We have been struggling for many years. And I still don't know which will win the battle. But that very hatred of fear has driven me to do a lot of things which I have never bothered to explain and which nobody understands. Fear is the blot on the thinking processes, crippling the individual's ability to act. I am not brave. I simply perform first and think later.'

Making allowance for artistic licence in McClure's version of Murphy's words, the sentiment rings true. Most men who act bravely in war do so because they dread succumbing to fear more than they dread the risk of being killed. Like more than a few such men, in war as in peace Murphy fought as many battles with himself as with the enemy. If he lacked self-belief, he possessed willpower of an extraordinary kind, together

with an anger that never left him. He was better at fighting than anything else, and when the fighting was over he found himself at a loss. Captain Ian Fraser of the Royal Navy, who won a Victoria Cross in the Second World War, wisely observed: 'A man is trained for the task that might win him a VC. He is not trained to cope with what follows.'

There was no joy for Murphy in movie stardom. He seemed to hate himself for accepting the indignities of Hollywood life in return for fame, cash and an unlimited supply of pretty girls. He perceived himself as a one-man freak show, the war hero exhibited before a predatory and invasive public in a fashion little different from that of the Elephant Man almost a century earlier. Wretched though his childhood was, it seems likely that after the war he might have found repose more easily in a humbler role in the sort of town he first came from, rather than in Hollywood. James Cagney may have done Murphy no favours by his patronage in 1945. Other men honoured for notable battlefield feats somehow contrived to return to civilian life without pretension or trauma. The youngest British winner of the Victoria Cross in the First World War was a gardener whom came home in 1918 to spend the rest of his life among flowers and fruits. By contrast, the experience of Hollywood stardom almost destroyed Audie Murphy's fragile self-esteem. He was a superb foot soldier and close-quarter fighter who deserved well of his country for his wartime service, but whom celebrity exposed as a tragic figure. It laid bare his lack of other gifts, indispensable to the conduct of a normal existence in time of peace. Murphy's history is a cautionary tale for any modern reader rash enough to envy those who experience the thrills and adventures offered by war.