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AUDIE ISN'T EXACTLY SHOUTING FOR JOY

The great hero apparently will be just as happy when not even a whisper is heard about 'Whispering Smith'

Last May 8 was to have been something of a milestone in the life of one of America's most-decorated war heroes. Congressional Medal of Honor – winner Audie Murphy was to have made his debut as the star of his own TV film series, *Whispering Smith*.

The debut, however, was peremptorily and summarily dumped out the window that evening to make way for an NBC News special – a report on the exploits of a more recent American hero, Cdr Alan B. Shepard Jr. of the Mercury astronauts.

The irony of the situation, while not entirely lost on Murphy, was hardly soul-searing. "I'm glad," he said, "that it didn't take as long to get Shepard off the ground as it's taken this series. I'd begun to think the Congo would be ahead of us in the space race before *Whispering Smith* ever got on the air."

On the afternoon of May 15, the night the show did indeed go on the air, Murphy excused himself from a luncheon table. He said he thought he might mosey over to his lawyer's and see if he couldn't get an injunction to keep the show *off* the air.

Murphy was, in point of fact, kidding on the square. *Whispering Smith* had rather agonizing birth pains. The last of its 26 episodes was completed some time ago and Murphy feels now that the whole project belongs in another era. "When they said this series could be made cheap," he says, "my immediate reaction was that we wouldn't make it cheap at all. I fought with them constantly."

At 37, Murphy still manages to look almost as youthful and innocent as the 19-year-old kid he was when he won 24 decorations during World War II. His hair is still thick and brown, his waistline still trim. He still doesn't smoke or drink, and never has.

"I was," he says, "a tired old man at the age of 20." By 20 Murphy had not only the Medal of Honor and all the kudos that goes with it, he also had been summoned to Hollywood by James Cagney and launched into a career which, he comments wryly, has had him playing Audie Murphy for 15 years now.

“I’m not an actor,” he says. “I don’t even like actors. By that I mean I have nothing in common with them. They’re dedicated souls with just one driving goal in life, and I’m not. I don’t malign them – I just don’t spend any time with them.”

Practically the first person Murphy met when he came to Hollywood was actress Wanda Hendrix. “We were married in 1949,” says Miss Hendrix, “the divorce proceedings were started in 1950 and the marriage dissolved in 1951...I wish him all the best. Audiences like the sweeter, warmer side of Audie and I would never want to take that away from him.”

Married for the past 10 years to the former Pamela Archer, one-time superintendent of hostesses for a major airline, Murphy has two young sons, Terry Michael, 9, and James Shannon, 7. He owns an 800-acre ranch north of Hollywood and currently operates a stable of seven thoroughbreds which, he says “pay their way and a little more.”

Murphy doesn’t recall how he got into *Whispering Smith*, but figures it must have sounded like a good idea at the time. He had done very little TV prior to that (*G.E. Theater, Ford Startime*) and none since. “I don’t even watch TV,” he shrugs. “Don’t go to movies, either.” I’ve never seen myself on any screen, movie or TV. Don’t even watch rushes.”

The career of *Whispering Smith* was enough in itself to have made Murphy tired. It first went into production in the summer of 1959, headed for the Monday-at-7:30 time period on NBC that fall. After filming seven episodes, co-star Guy Mitchell broke his shoulder and production had to be postponed. Then NBC found a couple of buyers for *Richard Diamond* and *Love and Marriage* were canceled, but NBC moved *Riverboat* into the open hour and *Whispering Smith* once more was shelved. It was then scheduled for Friday nights last spring. Actually, it ended up on Monday nights because the *Smith* series had to be scheduled to fill the void left by the cancellation of *Acapulco*. A new show, the 87th *Precinct*, is waiting in the wings to take over the time spot in the fall but still, anything can happen to the series.

“If the show is a success and they decide to make more,” Murphy said at that time, “I guess I’m hooked to go back. I really don’t want it to be a failure. But I’m not really looking forward to its being a smashing success either. Because I think my contract is firm for something like 86 episodes and I just don’t think I could stand that.”

There is some doubt, however, that Murphy will have to stand it. The series bowed to almost universal disapproval (“A bad show in practically all departments,” said one critic), and early in June was blasted by the Senate Juvenile Delinquency Subcommittee in Washington, which sat through the series’ initial episode. Sen. John

Carroll (D., Colo.) opined that *Whispering Smith* is “not only bad for children, it’s bad for adults.”

Despite his feelings about the show, Audie rushed to its defense. He issued this statement: “Apparently some people were shocked by what they considered violence in the first episode of *Whispering Smith*. My feeling is that this episode had an extremely high moral value, which has been overlooked. The story was about a policeman who was willing to risk his life in order to rehabilitate a juvenile delinquent...Smith was interested in helping youngsters and avoided violence for violence’s sake...In a half-hour TV show, the bad must be established fast and with impact or the entire show would dwell on this subject. If even extreme violence is part of good drama, it is never criticized. Unfortunately, too, for young Mr. Murphy, he had to learn his lesson – as they say in the Army – the hard way.