

From twinkle to tragedy: Audie Murphy

AUDIE MURPHY: American Soldier
(Harold B. Simpson: Hill Junior College
Press, Hillsboro;

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The nice young lady from the Waco paper called to ask about Audie Murphy. She understood I had known him. She had only vaguely heard of him.

MY FIRST impulse was near-anger, then sadness. Who was Audie Murphy?! Then the sobering realization dawned. World War II ended ten years before the nice young lady was born. There have been two wars disguised as debated 'police actions') since then. They consumed some brave men but neither of them produced an Audie Murphy.

No war will ever produce another like him. No other war ever has. Many reviewers of this great biography will refer to Audie Murphy as America's last real military hero--and his war as the last "popular" (or at least understood) war.

DURING HIS turbulent postwar career, to the moment he died in a plane crash on a Virginia hillside in May, 1971, Audie was described as "America's most decorated soldier." While that's correct, it's about like referring to the first man on the moon as "a prominent space explorer."

Since George Washington's day, the U.S. armed forces have authorized a dozen or so medals for combat heroism. To earn the top two or three you almost have to get killed. Soldiers who win a couple are, justly, celebrated.

Audie Murphy won every one of them--a couple of them twice. Plus three from France and one from Belgium. He earned a total of 33 military awards and citations. All before he was old enough to vote, and barely able to shave. A slight baby-faced guy who didn't smoke, drink or cuss.

THE AUDIE MURPHY true-life story would seem ridiculous if told as fiction. Nobody would believe it could happen. He had an eerie immunity to death in the cauldron of combat. Thanks in part to the fact that he was the consummate soldier. Shy, polite, peace-loving--with a carbine in his hands he was another being. Nobody, including himself, every really knew just how many enemies he killed (at least 200). yet he once answered an interviewer that his philosophy was "try to live each day so I won't hurt anyone else."

Hurt is a key word in the tragedy of Audie Murphy.

As a child his blue eyes had a twinkle. He smiled easily. Was a practical joker. And many of his days in the military or in

Hollywood or at home he enjoyed--but I still consider him one of the finest but saddest persons I have ever met. Not on the surface. Behind the twinkle in his eyes I (and others who knew him longer and better) detected a bone-deep weariness and longing for something he could never have. An aching emptiness no medals or adulation or money could fill.

THIS splendid volume provides the answers. The grinding poverty he experienced as a lad, his strained relationship with his father, the resulting reverence for his mother, the deaths of (and Simpson's) view, was born to be a soldier and missed his calling. He loved the army (not that he liked war and killing) and it defies explanation that he literally led a charmed life in 400 days of "War Two" combat and that nothing went right for him afterwards. He might still be alive, without stomach pains and screaming nightmares, if he'd stayed in uniform.

THIS BOOK will surprise some Murphy fans by detailing his postwar career in the Texas National Guard's renowned 36th (T-Patchers) Division--where I knew him; his little-known abilities as a songwriter and poet; and his weakness for gambling and ill-fated financial deals.

This is the final, the whole story of Texas' (and the U.S.'s) Audie Murphy. His oldest sister, Mrs. Corrine Burns of Grand Prairie, who filled the vast void left for Audie by his mother's death, personally picked former Air Force Colonel Harold Simpson for the writing. It was the best possible choice.

WITH ALL the family's memorabilia and cooperation, Simpson launched what obviously became a labor of love for him. A world War II veteran himself, he is a lifelong historian with a flair for the personalities of history. His specialty is the American Civil War. he interrupted his fourth volume of the history of Hood's "Texas Brigade" to put in two years on the Murphy story. This is the 21st volume he has written, edited or compiled.

Simpson is a master at battle reports, a skill which comes in handy in detailing Murphy's odyssey through Sicily, Italy, France and Germany as a member of the famed 3rd Infantry Division's 15th Regiment. This section will have more appeal for the military enthusiast, but it never drags for the non-military reader.

SIMPSON (a TCU professor and director of the Hill Junior College Confederate Research Center) is noted for his thoroughness. Any time a name is mentioned, a footnote provides background, for persons, places, ships, ---- recipe for the pumpkin-bread young Audie coveted.

This big (8 1/3 by 11 inches) beautiful book is 400 pages thick with 250 photos, plus maps. The 4-color jacket has an original portrait of Murphy by Milton Rowcroft. Besides the complete bibliography of Murphy source materials, there are listings of the 18 country-western songs Audie collaborated on; of his 44 motion pictures; of all his decorations; and of poems written by or about him.