

AUDIE MURPHY: ACTOR, SONGWRITER, SOLDIER

*By Phillip T. Washburn, TEXCOM Public Affairs
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Most of what people today know, or think they know, about Audie Murphy comes from his autobiographical movie "To Hell and Back."

But to really know Audie Murphy, the Hollywood account is not enough.

While most agree there is some false information floating around about Murphy, the one undisputed fact is that Audie L. Murphy performed some of the most heroic acts under fire of any soldier-citizen in American history.

On the battlefields of Sicily, Italy and France, Murphy earned every medal for valor his country could give, including medals from the French and Belgium governments.

Murphy is credited with killing approximately 240 enemy soldiers and, out of 16 million who served, he is the most decorated combat soldier of World War II.

In 1955, "**To Hell and Back**" brought the war hero to life for a generation of youngsters who would shortly sail off to Vietnam to fight their own battles. Like Murphy, many would be teenage soldiers.

Most would never learn that Murphy, knowing all too well the nightmares facing returning soldiers, would be an

outspoken ally on behalf of the veterans.

On the big screen, Murphy was larger than life - as he was off the screen too.

Today Audie Murphy would be 72 years old ... or would he?

Some reports say Murphy was 16 when he joined the Army in June 1942. Others, including his autobiography say he joined on his 18th birthday.

The truth may be in the middle. Larryann Willis, secretary/treasurer of the Audie Murphy Research Foundation in Santa Clarita, Calif., said a Texas Department of Health birth certificate on file in Austin shows Murphy was born June 20, 1924, near Kingston, Texas-making him 18 when he joined.

However, Willis, an attorney in the entertainment field, said the problem with that documentation is that it was filed only 90 days before Murphy enlisted.

In truth, Willis said there may have never been an original birth certificate. That would not have been unusual for the time and place Murphy was born.

She added that later in life Murphy frequently said he changed his birthdate to get in the Army in 1942.

On a passport application Murphy filed in the late 1960s, he listed his birthdate in 1925, which would have made him 17

and underage when he headed to Fort Wolters, Texas, for basic training. Another indication of being younger was that Murphy entered the service at only 5 feet 5 inches tall and 111 pounds. He grew to 5 feet 9 inches and 145-150 pounds after leaving the service - a growth of four inches and 40 pounds.

If Murphy did join the Army at age 17, that would mean he was a teenager when he rose from private to lieutenant, earned the Medal of Honor, Distinguished Service Cross, two silver Stars, two Bronze Stars, three Purple Hearts and the Legion of Merit.

On Jan. 26, 1945, probably at age 19, Murphy assumed command of the very company he joined in North Africa as a private in 1943. He earned the Medal of Honor his first day on the job as company commander.

Audie Murphy was born in Hunt County just off Highway 69, said Reference Librarian Gail Slater of the Greenville Library.

Thanks to a Life Magazine article in 1946, Hunt has even seen college professors studying Murphy refuse to believe he was from anywhere but Farmersville, just to the west in Collin County.

Part of Hunt's job is answering questions about Murphy, and inquiries come from all over the world even today. Just recently a woman from Australia was on the phone inquiring about visiting the Greenville Library room dedicated to Murphy.

Although he was basically without any formal education beyond the fifth grade,

Murphy was actually as smart as he was brave.

"He had a photographic memory," Willis said, describing him as "brilliant."

He could not type, but he wrote his famous autobiography through longhand and dictation to his columnist/friend Spec McClure, Willis said.

Actually, it was McClure who persuaded Murphy to pen his story.

Only after McClure finally convinced Murphy that "**To Hell and Back**" was the only way the men of Company B, 1st Battalion, 15th Infantry, 3rd Infantry Division, would ever be remembered, did Murphy agree to start writing.

It was not a book to glorify himself, it was a soldier's story about soldiers in the front lines of the global conflict, Willis pointed out.

When the book was put on film, Murphy, at age 31, played himself at age 18, and he looked the part. Part of his legacy is that he never seemed to age.

It was not because he had an easy life. He was the sixth of 13 children born into extreme poverty.

"We were dirt poor, but we didn't know it," sister Nadine recently told Brad Kellar of the Greenville Herald Banner.

Nadine was one of three siblings Murphy reclaimed from an orphanage after the war. One of her memories includes accepting a bronze statue in Audie's name when he was inducted into the National Cowboy Hall of Fame just last year.

Murphy made more than 40 movies, many of which were westerns. He played the lead in most of them. His most interesting role may have been in "**The Quiet American**," released in 1958 and possibly the first time most Americans ever heard about Vietnam.

Murphy did more than act. Having written 17 country and western songs, he was inducted into the Country Music Association of Texas Hall of Fame last year.

All the while in Hollywood, Murphy remained a staunch American patriot. But he never seemed truly comfortable with his medals or subsequent fame.