

May

By Mike West

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<https://www.audiemurphy.com/msgb/viewtopic.php?f=1&t=4793>

Editor's Note: Delivered as a speech by the author at Audie Murphy Days 2021 at the Audie Murphy – Cotton Museum in Greenville, Texas.

“**T**ODAY is May 22, 2021. I suspect that does not come as a revelation to you. Before you assume that I am simply a master of the obvious or worse, that I have lost all control of my faculties, let me point out that the month of May is highly significant in the study of Audie Murphy of the 3rd Infantry Division.

It is a painful fact that in 6 days, May 28th will mark the 50th anniversary of the death of Audie Leon Murphy. On May 28, 1971, Murphy and 5 others perished in a plane crash in western Virginia. The fatal flight departed Dekalb-Peachtree airport, in Atlanta, Georgia for a business trip to Martinsville, Virginia. The flight went well until around 11:00 a.m. when they ran into bad weather. At 11:49 a.m. the pilot, Herman Butler, radioed Roanoke, Virginia for weather conditions. The report he received was as follows “ceiling was 1,000 feet broken, 2,500 feet overcast, visibility

three miles in light rain and fog, with mountain ridges obscured.”¹

These conditions would have likely posed no problem to an instrument



-Photo source: Henry Boden

Brushy Mountain Memorial erected on the site where Audie Murphy died on May 28, 1971.

¹ Harold B. Simpson, Audie Murphy: American Soldier, (Dallas: Alcor Publishing, 1982), pp. 385-389.

rated pilot, but Herman Levelle Butler was not so rated.²

Some 19 minutes later, the airplane would crash into the side of Brushy Mountain, near New Castle, Virginia. The final report concerning the crash made note of the bad weather conditions, but the final sentence is telling. "The board also finds that the pilot attempted to continue flight into instrument weather conditions which were beyond his operational capabilities."³

A side note: on September 4, 1988, a plane crash near Carthage, Texas killed 4 passengers and the pilot. The pilot was Marcus Butler, brother of Herman L. Butler.⁴

Tomorrow, May 23rd, will mark 80 years since the death of Josie Bell



-Photograph by Mike West

² National Transportation Safety Board Press Release, June 15, 1972, p. 1.

³ National Transportation Safety Board Press Release, June 15, 1972, p. 3.

⁴ The Marshall News Messenger (Marshall, Texas), Mon., Sept. 5, 1988, p. 1.; The Times (Shreveport, Louisiana), Tues., Sept. 6, 1988, p. 1.

Killian Murphy, the mother of Audie Murphy and eleven other children. The last of those children, Nadine Murphy Lokey, is an honored guest today.⁵

Let us move in time to May 22, 1944, exactly 77 years ago. The place is Anzio-Nettuno, Italy. Allied Forces have been here since January 22, 1944, and it has been a bloodbath. Allied forces are on the verge of the breakout from this costly nightmare of 4 months and one day.⁶ One day, you ask? Yes. 1944 was a leap year, so you had one extra day to be killed or maimed.⁷

In an operation called "Buffalo", allied forces were to open the offensive on May 23, 1944 at 5:45 a.m. with an intense artillery barrage followed at 6:30 a.m. with an all-out infantry assault on the German lines. The objective of the 3rd Infantry Division was the town of Cisterna, a German stronghold since the landing in January 1944. Once Cisterna was captured, the Division was to move on to take the town of Cori.⁸

On the evening of January 21, 1944, the order came, "Move up tonight".

⁵ Texas Death Certificate for Josie Murphy, author's collection.

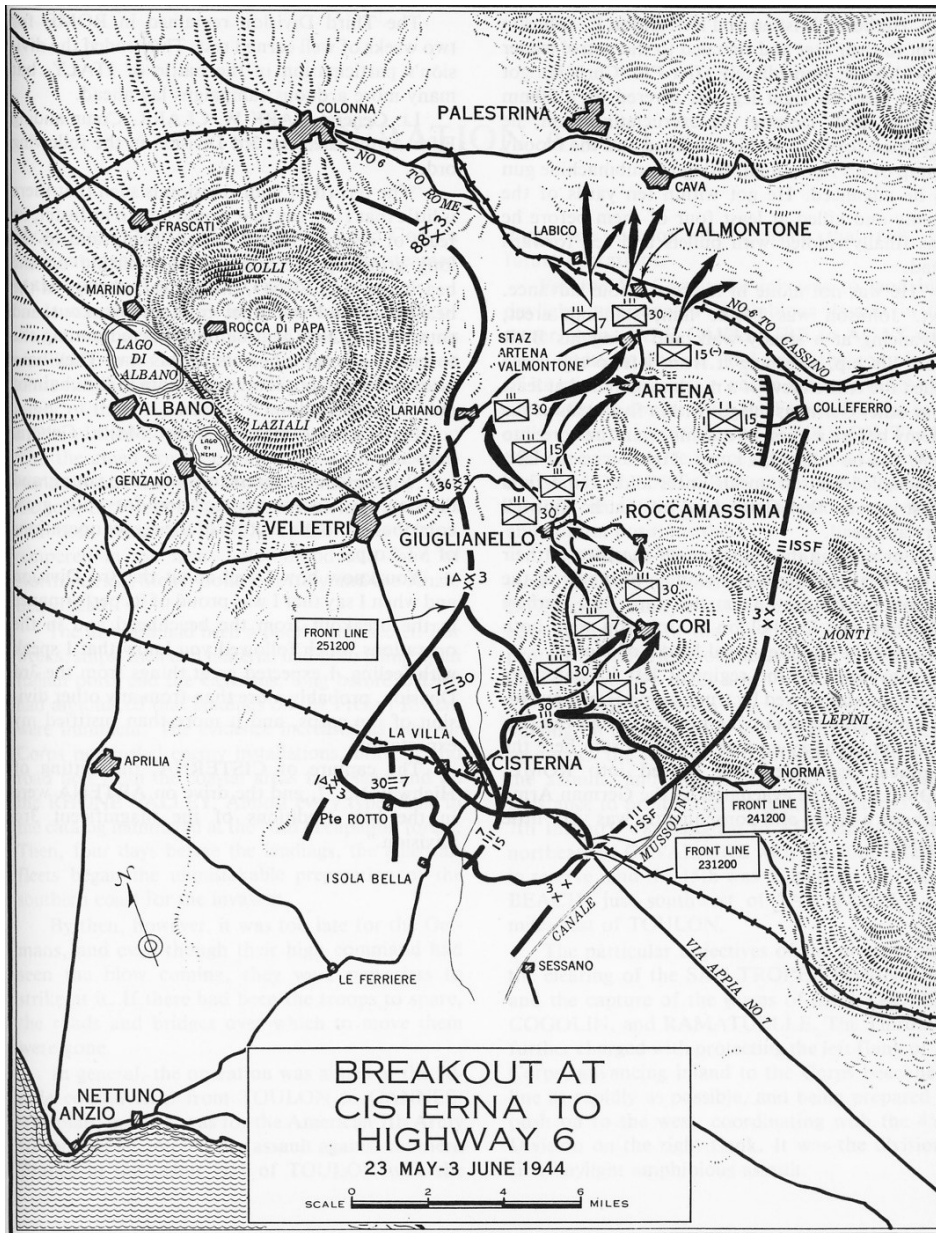
⁶ Donald G. Taggart, History of The Third Infantry Division on World War II, (Washington: Infantry Journal Press, 1947), p. 150.

⁷ Perpetual calendar

⁸ Taggart, pp. 153-156.

As the 3rd Infantry Division began moving, the song “Dogface Soldier” was played by the division band. The evening of the 22nd found all of the Third Division in place and everything

was in readiness.⁹ Might I add that on the 22nd, the 36th Infantry Division – also known as the “Texas Division”, had completed its secret movement



-Original Map Source: History of the 3rd Infantry Division in World War II

⁹ Simpson, pp. 102-103.



-Source: <https://military.wikia.org>

15th Infantry Regiment official military crest.

ashore to add to the assault one more division.¹⁰

The 15th Infantry Regiment of which Audie Murphy was a member was to assault the right side of the town Cisterna so as to capture Highway 7 and the railroad. Other units of the Third Division were to assault Cisterna directly and on the left side.

With these introductory remarks, it is my desire to briefly introduce you to what happened over the next four days from May 23rd through May

¹⁰ Rick Atkinson, *The Day of Battle in Sicily and Italy, 1943-1944*, (New York, New York: Holt and Company, 2007), p. 537.

¹¹ Taggart, p. 188.

26th. A summary of what happened appears in the 3rd Infantry Division History and it reads as follows:

“The division’s frontal assault and breakthrough ... was a monument not only to the excellence of planning and coordination at every level, but also to the indomitable spirit and sheer fighting ability of the troops.”¹¹

These are lofty words, all true, mind you – but they miss the mark. *Indomitable spirit?* Yes. *Sheer fighting ability?* Absolutely, but let us get down to where the average American GI lived and died.¹² Let us see as one Company B man said, “*At a worm’s eye view.*”¹³

On the morning of May 23, following an intense artillery barrage, the infantry attacked the assigned objectives. At the end of 24 hours, the 3rd Infantry Division would suffer the highest single day casualty list in its history. Nearly 1,000 men were either KIA, WIA, or MIA¹⁴. In comparison from January 22, 1944, D-Day at Anzio, through May 22, 1944, the division suffered

¹² Taggart, p. 188.

¹³ Albert L. Pyle, interview with author.

¹⁴ Military acronyms for killed in action, wounded in action, and missing in action.

approximately 6,300 such casualties.¹⁵

The next day, May 24th, would mark a near fatal incident for Audie Murphy. It was during the effort to cross the railroad cut southeast of Cisterna that as Murphy was sliding down the bank his entrenching shovel caught on a rock. A German machinegun began firing at him and as he recounts in *TO HELL AND BACK...*

“I hung like a pigeon upon the bank with lead spattering all about me. Rock dust from the bullets fills my nostrils. My throbbing temples seem ready to burst ... I free myself with a desperate heave and bolt across the tracks.”¹⁶

Shortly after that incident, the action for which the first of only two Medals of Honors were to be awarded to Company B, 15th Infantry, was to take place. This action would be witnessed by the only other recipient of Company B, 15th Infantry, Audie Murphy. A sergeant in the 2nd platoon, after crossing the railroad, sees great danger to his men from German machineguns. He attacks across 200 yards of open territory to engage those guns and the infantry with them. He destroys several of the machineguns but is killed. In the

words of Audie Murphy in *TO HELL AND BACK*, “This was how Lutsky, the sergeant, helped buy the freedom that we cherish and abuse.”¹⁷ Sergeant Lutsky was in fact Sergeant Sylvester Antolak, 2nd Platoon, Company B.¹⁸

A footnote, if you will: of the 39 Medals of Honor received by the men of the Third Infantry Division during World War II, five of them were earned in the 48-hour period of time from May 23, 1944 to May 24, 1944. Three of the five were posthumously awarded. Two more would be



-Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org>

**Sergeant Sylvester Antolak
2d Platoon, 1-15 Infantry**

¹⁵ Taggart, p. 164; Atkinson, p. 541.

¹⁶ Audie Murphy, *To Hell and Back*, (First Owl Books, 2002), pp. 151-152.

¹⁷ Murphy, pp. 152-153.

¹⁸ Taggart, pp. 170-171.

awarded for actions on June 2-3, 1944. Both were posthumous.¹⁹

Over the next day or so, as the Germans were being pushed from Cisterna, a well-known character in *TO HELL AND BACK* would be killed. Let us listen to Audie as he describes what happened.

“We have not long to look before a heavy artillery barrage is turned on us ... I Dive into a foxhole ... I am sitting with my helmeted head between my knees when a body tumbles into the pit. It is Horse-Face. His face is ash-gray; his smile is feeble ... ‘Nothing but a scratch’, Horse-Face insists.”

Audie hurries for a medic but when they return, “Private Abraham Homer Johnson, otherwise known as Horse-Face, is dead.”²⁰

With the end of the fighting on May 25th, both Cisterna and Cori, a small mountain town, are in the hands of the Third Division. With strong German resistance over, the men of the 15th Infantry move along a road north of Cori in relative safety when around noon on the 26th of May, a flight of American P-40 Fighter

Bombers attack from over the hills. The 2nd Battalion is in the lead with the 1st Battalion just behind when bombs and machine gun bullets decimate the forward elements of both units. Over 100 men are casualties with most of those being in the 2nd Battalion but Company B lost at least 4 who were killed.²¹ (A side note: I will pen in a future article more on these four soldiers, which will be titled “*The Boys of Cori*”.)

The Third Division will go on to be involved in the capture of Rome and from there, they will rest and train for the assault on Southern France.

Over the next 12 to 15 months, it is my desire to write some short articles about the fictional characters found in Audie Murphy’s *TO HELL AND BACK*. I have been working on identifying them so that real names can replace these unknown men. We can then better know their stories and sacrifices.

Murphy understood that too often the valor and sacrifices of these common men went unrecognized whether they died in battle or survived and returned home. Audie Murphy recognized the obligation we have to remember them by making their stories known.

¹⁹ Edward F. Murphy, *Heroes of WWII*, (New York, First Ballentine Books Edition: Second printing, July 1992), pp. 375-395; Taggart, pp. 379-388.

²⁰ Taggart, pp. 155-156.

²¹ Murphy, p. 161.; Taggart, p. 173.: Morning Reports for Co. B, May 27-29, 1944, author's collection.

This obligation, I think, is a goal of the Audie Murphy Research Foundation and you will see more of that over the next few months along with other stories of the folks who influenced the life of Audie Leon Murphy.

Finally, with the passing of time, the location of various places associated

with Audie Murphy's life become more and more difficult to determine. We hope to correct that too with several articles under the broad title of "*Where Was That Place?*"

- Mike West