ANECDOTES ABOUT AUDIE MURPHY[1]

By
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Three weeks after the capture of Rome in early June 1944, the US 3rd Infantry Division closed out its occupation of the city and moved back south, past the raw battlegrounds between Anzio and the great city. The division's 15th Infantry Regiment and its combat team partner, the 39th Field Artillery, settled in north of Naples, near the coastal village of Pozzuoli. It was a time for healing, but also a time for training for the battles to come--amphibious training. The troops didn't know where. But the troops did know that they would go into battle in combat team formation. Thus it was that the commanders of the 15th and 39th agreed that it would be a good idea for all of the infantry noncommissioned officers to be trained in calling for, and directing, artillery firepower.

Sergeant Audie Murphy was there, sitting on the knob of a sand dune, as I addressed my group of trainees. I hadn't met Murphy, didn't know him; but I was impressed with the interest that all of the NCOs showed in the business at hand. We covered rapidly some of the general principles of employment of artillery firepower and then got down to the methods of artillery adjustment. Our terrain board was a clearing between several dunes, our artillery was a large ball of cotton which, when plunked down on the ground, represented an artillery shell burst. Using the cotton shell bursts, I exercised every one of the NCOs through a terrain problem. They all seemed to get the hang of it. Then a day or two later, we went out to do the real thing with real artillery.

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Our firing range was improvised. Gun positions were selected a few miles inland from the coast, and our observation post was a comfortable sand dune looking out to sea where a large anchored raft was our target. Several hands popped up when I asked for volunteers to direct artillery fire on to the target. I picked the hand of a young, red-headed, freckle-faced sergeant, who seemed to be no more than 18 years old.

He put his field glasses to his eyes, made some observations and measurements, and then spouted out his firing order to the radio operator close by for transmission to the artillery fire direction center. A wag in the group remarked, "Let's dig some foxholes fast! That first shot will be in our laps!" A few anxious moments passed, and then a few heads dipped into their collars as we heard the whine of artillery shells overhead. "Short! Add 100!" commanded the sergeant. His data had been good--good enough to produce a volley burst directly on line between the observation post and the target. But, good grief! He was making only the minimum jump in range to get an "over" round and thus bracket the target! Moments later, the shells whined over again. "Over! Drop 50, fire for effect". We couldn't believe our eyes. His estimate of range change was perfect. The next volley clobbered the target. The freckle-faced sergeant smiled, obviously pleased with himself, and then slowly sat down.

It was all quite amazing. After only a few hours of terrain board instruction, Sergeant Murphy had fired the perfect artillery problem.

It was midwinter of 1945, many months and many battles after Anzio and Rome. I was the artillery liaison officer with regimental headquarters of the 15th Infantry. The orders were to wipe out the German pocket around Colmar near the Swiss border of France. The American attack had

jumped off and moved fast; there were now many dents in the Colmar pocket. But the battle had been very hard, there were many casualties. Now the American thrusts seemed to be wavering. The cold, the snow and ice, battle weariness, and German armor were taking their toll.

Near the village of Holzwihr in the Colmar pocket, there was an H-shaped patch of woods. The 15th was on the attack towards the woods; Audie Murphy was in the thick of it. From the legs of the H-shaped woods, the Germans counterattacked. Over my radio, I could hear our infantry calling for artillery fire. It was clear that this fight was in the balance. I got on the telephone to tell artillery fire direction to pour it on. The artillery roared incessantly. And our dog-faces stuck with it, repulsed the counterattack, and soon decimated the Germans.

From subsequent accounts of this fight, I learned that Audie was one of those dog-faces directing the artillery fire that helped him and his comrades repulse the Germans. I like to think that the training I gave to that freckle-faced sergeant on the sand dunes near Pozzuoli, some 6 months previously, had helped him in that terrible fight that day near Holzwihr. I like to think that I helped Audie Murphy earn his Congressional Medal of Honor. These are thoughts of pride.

It was spring of 1945 and the 3rd Infantry Division was driving the Germans back into the heartland of their country. I had been switched once again from a battery commander in the 39th Field Artillery to regimental liaison officer with the 15th Infantry. Audie Murphy was there-part of the headquarters staff. He had not asked for the assignment. It was policy that when someone was recommended for the Medal of Honor, he was automatically pulled out of his infantry line company to the

relative safety of regimental headquarters. Audie was a lieutenant then; he had been honored with a battlefield commission.

There was another lieutenant in the headquarters who had been pulled back from the line for the same reason; Tominac was his name, and he too had been recommended for the Medal of Honor. We three seemed to be grouped in the same billets every time we moved forward into a new location. I suppose there was no particular reason for this; probably the Headquarters Commandant just found it convenient. Our contacts in the billets were infrequent, generally before "sack time." And there was usually a bull session about the war and events of the day, not much else.

I soon found myself wondering about those two, Murphy and Tominac. I had expected the growth of a solid friendship--of two comrades-in-arms two who had experienced the agony, two who were about to be honored with the glory. But it never came to pass. Rather, I witnessed a mildly friendly relationship, perhaps even a somewhat cold one. During these bull sessions each would express his thoughts on the subject; they would discuss it for a while; then each would take a position, sum up his thoughts in positive fashion, and that was that! But they rarely agreed on anything--or so it seemed to me--whether it was tactics, the grand strategy of the Allies, the need for a rest and recreation center, or the merits of the cache of wine that had last been liberated by our troops. And this is the way it continued.

I never did understand it fully. I had thought then that it was simply the natural path for these two admired young men to become close friends. And I suppose I was surprised and disappointed that they did not.

It was mid-spring of 1945 and the 3rd Infantry Division had entered Nurnberg which had fallen from the mortal blows of massed artillery, bombings, and troop assaults. We had witnessed the raising of the American flag in Adolph Hitler Platz in the central walled city, and then sped on to the south into Bavaria. American advances were a daily occurrence, and the gains were increasing; the German resistance was weakening fast, and large numbers were being taken prisoner every day. At the 15th Infantry Regimental Headquarters, Audie Murphy was getting bored and restless in his staff assignment. He wanted to be back with the line troops--where the action was--where there was now great exhilaration-for victory and the war's end seemed to be in sight. Audie paced the floor of the operations room, fidgeting with the flap of his pistol holster. The Operations Officer, Major McLaughlin, and the Intelligence Officer, Captain (Red) Coles, were there, noses buried in maps, studying the fast-moving military situation.

Suddenly, Audie turned to them and, with obvious anticipation in his voice said, "Let's go out and get some Krauts!" The other two looked up from their maps and considered it for at least two seconds; then their eyes lit up with expression as if to say "Yeah, why didn't we think of that before?" "Let's use my jeep," one said. "OK," said another. "We'd better get some M-1 rifles," said a third. And in a cloud of dust, the three musketeers of the 15th Infantry drove off to join in the fray, like school kids off on a picnic.

After driving through the advance elements of the American forces, they ran up against a German roadblock near a small bridge. There was a hot exchange of rifle and machine gun fire and then the three sized up the situation as a no-go. They climbed back into their jeep and high-tailed it out of range of the German weapons.

When they returned to headquarters, they appeared to be subdued; and related their story somewhat sheepishly. But although they had brought back no Krauts, it was clear that they were satisfied. For a brief period, they had been back in the real battle--back where the action was--back where they felt they belonged.

The Germans were really beaten! There was no doubt about it in late April of 1945, as the US Seventh Army swept eastward through Bavaria. The American pursuit of the Germans was relentless; armored thrusts, hell-on-wheels, cut off large enemy formations from further retreat. Towns and cities were captured with ease; there was seldom a fire-fight before a town or city fell into American hands.

Thus it was, as the 3rd Infantry Division entered Augsburg, a picturesque city of moderate size. At regimental headquarters of the 15th Infantry, Audie Murphy was still bored and restless; he wanted to get back with the fighting troops. At the headquarters too was a lieutenant (John Doe) recently attached from Seventh Army. He was a historian, dispatched to get a close-up view of the Army in battle; and he had a jeep, assigned for his own use on this mission.

When we learned that there was a large warehouse area in Augsburg, the three of us, Murphy, Doe and I, decided in the exhilaration of the moment, that it must be worth exploring. So we set off in Doe's jeep, pleased and anticipating a little excitement. The bottle of whiskey that Doe pulled out of his sack was just the touch needed to start the party.

The warehouse area was large, covering probably a square mile; and the open spaces between the warehouses was perhaps 50 yards. There were

pigeons warming themselves in the spring sun. We sauntered up to one warehouse and tried the door, but it was locked tight. Murphy whipped out his pistol and started shooting at the lock. But even the heavy Army pistol slugs were not powerful enough to break the locks of the heavy wooden doors. This made Murphy angry; he holstered his pistol. But just then something disturbed a flock of pigeons nearby and they took flight. He flung the M-1 rifle off his left shoulder, positioned it to his right, and shot down one of the pigeons, all so quickly that Doe and I hardly realized what was happening. I thought to myself, ''Some of Doe's whiskey is taking effect! Anyway, that was a fantastic shot, a bird on the wing with an M-1 rifle!"

Doe and I walked across the yard to the opposite warehouse leaving Murphy standing in the bright sun some 50 yards away. Doe was muttering something about "show-off" and seemed disturbed by what had just happened. Then, for some strange reason, he suddenly turned around, grabbed the helmet off his head, and shouted to Murphy "Bet you can't hit this!" Crack! The sound of the rifle shot reached my ears just about the same time as I heard Doe's last word, "this." I looked at Doe. He was standing there, mouth agape, in complete disbelief that he was looking at a bullet hole smack in the center of his helmet. In a few moments, his disbelief turned to anger and he yelled to Murphy, "All right, you bastard! Now hold up your helmet!" Murphy took off his helmet and Doe pulled his pistol out of its holster. Right then and there, I concluded that a half-drunk historian probably couldn't hit the side of the warehouse even if he threw his pistol at it. But there was a chance that he might hit Murphy. So I stepped up and said "OK, this is it. Let's stop this right now!" They both obeyed, relaxed, and came together in the center of the courtyard. I guess they realized the danger in this bizarre situation.

I did the driving back to headquarters. The party spirit was gone, silence reigned. I kept wondering about this crazy afternoon. It had started out to

be a happy, adventurous day, but it might have ended tragically. I was glad it was ending. I glanced over to Doe and Murphy. They were both dozing in the bouncing jeep.

It was early May of 1945. The American pursuit of the Germans, eastward across Bavaria, was now a rout. The 3rd Infantry Division crossed the border into Austria and entered the historic city of Salzburg. At the 15th Infantry regimental headquarters there was a festive air.

We all knew the war was finally at an end. When the word did come announcing the end of hostilities on the 8th of May, everyone broke out their bottles of wine, beer, schnaps, ersatz liqueur, and whatever else had been hoarded for this occasion. Within a short time, a joyous drinking party was in full swing in the regimental operations room. All the staff was strangely relaxed, happy, smiling, and thankful. The drinking went on at a good pace, and it was having its effect; the gayety increased.

Soon some bottles ran dry. There was some concern about that, but not for long. Audie Murphy and a few of the other staff officers came through as only the "Can Do" regiment could. In they charged with several cases of champagne, real champagne. "Here it is, drink up!" they shouted. "This is brought to you straight from the Eagles Nest at Berchtesgaden with the compliments of the host, Adolph Hitler." There was a resounding cheer in the headquarters. The party took on renewed vigor and went on and on and on.

The war had been over for about a month. Most of the 3rd Infantry Division was still in Austria. It had shipped out its prisoners', tidied up its equipment and troops, and held a massive division victory parade. It had also started preparations to return to Germany for occupation duty. While these activities were going on, some of the "old soldiers," those who had seen combat service for the longest periods were returned to the States. The rest of us were to stay on for a while longer.

The 3rd Division had always been liberal with its rest and recuperation leaves, and it continued this policy even now. Many of us who were to continue in service were sent to the French Riviera for a few days. I was among those chosen, and looked forward to a good rest. I had been there in Cannes for 3 or 4 days when I met Audie Murphy once again.

He seemed real glad to see me, and was much more talkative than I had known him to be. We walked along the ocean front promenade while recalling some of the great events of the war period, the combat actions of the 3rd Division, and the people we both knew. When we tired of walking, he invited me to his hotel room for a drink. There we talked some more, this time on a more personal basis--about the Army as a career for him, about his chances for going to West Point, about his future. Talked for a long time. When I left, I summed up my thoughts about Audie Murphy. His roots were small town Texas, a family of many children, a very poor family, a public education through high school. And he had within him a combination of talents and qualities that had made him a national hero. His quick mind was matched by an uncanny quickness of body. He was open, fair, honest, and forthright; there was nothing phony about him. And he had a bit of a mean Texas streak that occasionally showed; but then perhaps this had helped him survive where others had not.