

# Youth and Size Prove Small Obstacles for Hero Audie Murphy

BY SUE DE PASQUALE

At 5-foot-5 and 112 pounds, he was too short to join the Marines, and the paratroopers wouldn't take him either. So "Baby Face" Murphy, the sharecropper's son from Texas, signed on with the Army (lying about his age in the process). His heroic exploits over the next three years—while serving in Sicily and France—would become the stuff of legends and earn him the distinction of being the most decorated U.S. combat soldier in World War II.



By the time the war ended, months before his 21st birthday, Audie Leon Murphy had fought in nine major campaigns across the European theater, been wounded three times, and earned 28 awards and decorations, including the Medal of Honor—the highest U.S. military award for bravery.

The famous one-man stand that earned the diminutive Murphy that honor unfolded on an icy wooded field near Holtzwihr, France, on January 26, 1945. Stubbornly intent on “holding the road” against approaching German infantry, Murphy ordered his men back to cover before advancing to climb atop a burning tank destroyer. With his map and field phone in hand, he directed artillery while spraying the advancing Germans with fire from the tank's .50-caliber machine gun. At one point, when the officer on the other end of the line asked how close the enemy had advanced, Murphy reportedly replied, “If you'll just hold the phone, I'll let you talk to one of [them].”

After more than an hour, the Germans retreated. Murphy got down from the tank, which exploded in flames soon afterward, and led his men on a successful counterattack. Accounts differ, but those familiar with the events report that Murphy single-handedly killed 50 to 100 opposing infantrymen that frigid January day.

After the war, Audie Murphy's storied battlefield heroics—and, undoubtedly, his good looks—landed him a spot on the cover of *Life* magazine, prompting actor James Cagney to invite him to Hollywood in the fall of 1945. The young Texan struggled at first but eventually signed a contract with Universal-International, where he starred in 26 films over the next 15 years. His best-known performance was in



Audie Murphy returned to France in 1948 at the invitation of the French government. During a visit to a local school, he was overwhelmed with emotion when a group of schoolchildren sang for him.

“The spirit of freedom was hovering over that play yard as it did all over France at that time,” he later recalled. “A country was free again. A people had recovered their independence and their children were grateful. They were singing in French, but the melody was freedom and any American could understand that. America, at that moment, never meant more to me.”

*To Hell and Back*, the 1955 blockbuster based on his autobiography of the same name. It held the record as Universal's highest grossing movie until *Jaws* in 1975.

Though he'd been forced to drop out of school to care for his siblings, Murphy had a knack with the written word. As a songwriter (hits included “Shutters and Boards,” and “When the Wind Blows in Chicago”) he teamed up with composers including Jimmy Bryant and Coy Ziegler to produce works for dozens of great performers, including Dean Martin, Eddy Arnold, Charley Pride and Roy Clark.

Despite the financial success of his work (it's estimated that his films alone earned him close to \$3 million), Murphy had trouble holding on to his money. He was a gambler, who bet on the horses and loved a poker game. It was while scouting out a business opportunity that Audie Murphy died at age 46. The private plane he was traveling in crashed into a mountain near Roanoke, Va., on May 28, 1971, killing all aboard.

Audie Murphy's death came at a time when he was lobbying the government to provide more funding for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder to veterans of the Korean and Vietnam wars. Murphy himself was plagued by recollections of battlefield horrors throughout his life.

Today, this American hero's grave—a simple, white, government-issue tombstone—is among the most visited grave sites at Arlington National Cemetery (after John F. Kennedy, Jr.'s and the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier). The small white slab provides room to list only a few of Audie Murphy's many military decorations, prompting Arlington's historians to note: “The stone is, as he was, too small.”