

A STORY AUDIE MURPHY NEVER TOLD

by Michael Paulick, Colonel Infantry

Throughout World War II, from which Audie Murphy emerged the most decorated GI, Col. Paulick was Murphy's Battalion Commander in the 3rd Division. Audie saved Col. Paulick's life in France's Vosges Mountains, and Paulick recommended Audie for a battlefield commission. Paulick subsequently earned every decoration earned by Audie - with the exception of the Congressional Medal of Honor - and Audie calls Paulick "the finest soldier I know." Paulick and Murphy were reunited when the colonel served as technical advisor for Audie's autobiographical film, "TO HELL AND BACK."

In the fall of 1943 American forces were attacking the outer defensive outposts of the German Cassino Line, an action that would develop into one of the toughest in military history. I was the newly assigned battalion commander of the 1st Battalion, 15th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Infantry Division, and it was my first tour of inspection that I recall meeting a slight, freckle-faced sergeant of company "B" whom I was destined to know a great deal better - Audie Murphy.

I did not really get to know Audie then, but by the following February at Anzio we had a great deal more in common. It was there that I came upon Audie's company with the company commander wounded, and only two inexperienced lieutenants left. I took command of the company, and we continued the attack for three days. At the end of those three days, fewer than 30 men survived. Audie was the only non-commissioned officer left, and there were no officers except myself. If I had never seen Audie Murphy again, I would remember him from that action. He was a soldier, a born leader, potentially a fine officer.

Soon after this Audie was promoted to platoon sergeant, normally the second-in-command to a first or second lieutenant in a full-strength platoon. But full-strength platoons were not in style that Fall. More often than not there was no platoon leader other than Audie for his platoon.

In the next few months Murphy distinguished himself again and again, was wounded and decorated with two Silver Stars and the

Distinguished Service Cross. Most of the time he was operating as a platoon sergeant in command of the platoon.

After the landing in South France late in 1944 and the subsequent drive up the Rhone Valley, we were again fighting in mountainous terrain with a casualty rate daily mounting. The shortage of officers was desperate, and no replacements were available. To meet the crisis the Seventh Army Commander announced a policy designated to speed-up battlefield commissions to enlisted men. I called in my company commanders, explained the situation and the new policy, and battlefield commissions. I told the commander of "B" Company that there was one name I wanted to see on his list, and that was the name of Audie Murphy.

A few days later the list came up, and Murphy's name was not on it. There was no time for questions then, but I made up my mind that the company commander had better have some good answers when I next saw him. The company commander's reason for the omission, as I learned when I did see him, was the best in the world: Audie flatly refused a commission.

With every decoration for valor his country could give him except the Congressional Medal of Honor, and daily commanding a platoon in some of the toughest combat of World War II, Audie did not consider himself officer material. He was embarrassed by his lack of formal education on the one hand. Perhaps more important was the fact that he did not choose to leave the men he had fought with so long. (To simplify the problems of command it was customary for a newly commissioned enlisted man to be transferred out of his old outfit.) No reasoning from the company commander would change Murphy's mind, but he did volunteer the information that he would be happy to continue to lead his platoon - as a sergeant!

It was as a sergeant that Murphy continued to lead his platoon in Company "B", and my next personal contact with him came after our fight through France had led into the Vosges mountains. At this stage the whole division was again short of officers and men. It was the mission of our battalion to defend a densely wooded mountain and to clear out a portion of that same mountain in an attack. A complete battalion could easily have been used on either mission. I had to try to clear that area with Company "B".

Company "B" attacked for several days with no hope of reinforcements to replace casualties and no sign of weakening either of the German resistance or of pressure on me, as battalion commander to get the job done. I decided to take a much closer look at the terrain.

One morning just before dawn I went to Company "B" and asked the company commander for a patrol to take me out to an observation point overlooking Cleurie Quarry - a point we had controlled briefly, but which was lost to enemy counter-attacks. Audie's platoon was directed to supply this patrol for the protection of myself, my operations officer, and the company commander, who would accompany us. Four men were assigned to the patrol, and we moved out.

Dawn was just breaking on the rocky hillside as we approached within sight of the observation point located over a sheer drop of about 50 feet into Cleurie Quarry. We had reached the edge of a wooded area. A clearing approximately 50 yards wide and perhaps 50 more yards of wooded terrain separated us from our objective. We approached the clearing carefully, then keeping low and moving fast we started across the clearing and I remember being only yards away from the wooded area when a burst of machine gun fire, coming from a point some 30 yards or so down the hillside, splattered the terrain. We hit the dirt and scrambled into a depression which afforded some cover.

The way to the observation point was clear now, but the route back to Company "B" was closed. A German combat outpost saw to that. Machine gun bullets ricocheted around us and the sound of our guns returning the fire kept our ears ringing. I remember thinking that we must have caught the German outpost asleep, else they would never have missed us with the first burst. I thought, too, that the only way we would ever cross that clearing alive would be when they slept again and that possibility seemed remote.

It was then that I heard a familiar voice over the noise of battle. One by one he called the names of every man in the patrol, waiting for an answer. It was Audie. I realized then that he must have some sort of plan in mind and that our positions had something to do with it. Perhaps half a minute later the first of a series of grenades shattered the outpost. After the last explosions we rushed the position to complete the elimination. We found a machine gun, four dead Germans, and three wounded.

One member of our patrol was wounded, and we formed a circle around him to await the arrival of a litter to evacuate the wounded man. When the litter arrived we all made our way back to Company "B". While we waited for the litter I had plenty of time to think about Sgt. Audie Murphy.

To me the important thing about what I had just seen was Murphy's immediate grasp of the situation, his precise thinking, and his uncanny coolness in action. Since he had said that he did not consider himself officer material, I wondered what he thought the U.S. Army was looking for in the way of officers.

In subsequent action I saw that same alertness and coolness under fire brought into action almost daily against the enemy. The need for officers was still critical. I decided the whole situation was ridiculous and called Murphy in to tell him he had to take a commission.

At the end of my spiel, Audie gave me the same answers he had given his company commander before. He told me that if we needed him in battle he was willing to continue to command a platoon. He knew he could do that. But for administration work of a higher order that might come up later, he insisted that he did not have the background. Besides, there was still the matter of leaving his company.

I told him to forget about administration; my own adjutant would help him if necessary. From the regimental commander I secured a waiver of the policy of moving newly commissioned men to new units, and Sgt. Murphy became 2nd Lt. Murphy.

It was not much later as a First Lieutenant commanding this same Company "B" which he had so long refused to leave that Audie Murphy, the soldier without the "qualifications" to become an officer, earned the nation's highest award for valor in battle, the Congressional Medal of Honor.