AUDIE MURPHY

The Man Behind the Medals

by RICHARD G. HUBLER

ONE SUMMER AFTERNOON in 1945 an undersized round-faced boy with wavy brown hair and freckles stood stiffly at attention on a Fifth Avenue reviewing stand beside a bemedalled general.

The boy, who wore the bars of an Army first lieutenant, had even more decorations than the general —four rows of battle and theater ribbons, a collection of battle stars like a bronze constellation, plus 24 medals and decorations topped with the Medal of Honor.

"I guess you could say I had more hardware on more ribbons than anyone else in the Army," says Audie Leon Murphy of that day.

(Not long afterward he gave away most of his awards to the children of relatives or passed them out to people who admired them. Recently the Army voluntarily replaced them for the benefit of his own posterity—Terry, a three-year-

Lt. Murphy

1945: awarded Medal of Honor.

old boy; and James, a one-year-old.)

The general turned to Audie. "Where do you plan on going, Murphy, now that the war is over?" he asked under his breath.

Audie held his salute. "Home, General," he said in his flat unemotional drawl. "Is there any other place to go, sir?"

Audie returned to his home state of Texas. He lolled around for awhile, hunting and fishing, out of sight of hero-worshippers—though he took part in a parade or two not to be disobliging. Then he restlessly hitchhiked to Hollywood.

He arrived with $11 in his pocket and no idea of what he could do. He had no thought of acting. He simply wanted to see Hollywood.

Audie took to sleeping in a gymnasium owned by one of his friends —Terry Hunt, a reducing expert— and started a book about what had happened to him during the war, writing in longhand. A gossip columnist's legman helped him whip it into shape for a share of the profits.

While he was working on it in the winter of 1946-47, Audie looked for a job. His situation was grim. He had been hired by one producer for $150 a week and summarily dropped. And he did not care much for the picture of the war that he had been writing about in his book.

"At 26, I was young enough to exaggerate everything," he says. "Even though I tried to tell the exact truth, it came out more than lifesize. I guess I *felt* things more in those days."

The book, *To Hell and Back*—a melodramatic title that Audie now wishes he had never put on it—became a best seller and brought him eventually about $40,000.

Lt. Murphy

1955: Audie, James, Terry, Pamela.

Seven years later, Audie found himself a $2,000-a-week Universal-International film star on location in the mountains of Yakima, Washington, making a picture based on the book. During those years he had steadily worked himself up the movie ladder—from his first inept performance as a juvenile delinquent—to the point where he was considered competent enough to portray himself in his own story.

For Audie, making this personal movie re-cap was like looking through the wrong end of a telescope. It seemed as if it happened far away, long ago—to someone who was not Audie Murphy at all.

He admits that not even the magic of the movies can make him again the soldier he was. "I don't believe as I did in the simple things—like going ahead and to hell with anything else," he says.

He still has strong loyalties, independence and a desire to live his own life in his own fashion; but he has learned to be cynical about politics, economics, about every ism except patriotism. For America made him, shaped him, gave him his chance to stand up.

Audie never hated anyone he fought: he believes the Germans were good soldiers and had a lot of guts. If they killed his friends, he killed theirs. It was something neither of them could help.

"I never wanted to make a film of my book," he says solemnly. "I had had offers before—from three big studios. It was five or six years later that I sold it for $25,000 plus 10 per cent of the profits."

He is not sure what changed his mind. He thinks frankly it might partly have been the money; he has always been afraid of putting his own family through the kind of "sharecropper scrimping" that marked his boyhood.

AUDIE LEON MURPHY was born June 20, 1925, on a 60-acre

Lt. Murphy

1950: in "The Red Badge of Courage."

cotton farm about 55 miles from Dallas, Texas, where his father, Emmett, and his mother, Josephine, were lucky to earn $600 a year sharecropping. The Murphys had 11 children, two dying before they were four.

Each of the surviving nine had to help out—and Audie's share was shooting rabbits and possums for the table. He became a dead shot.

His father deserted the family, his mother died in 1941, and Audie went to work at $14 a week on a farm, in a grocery store, at a filling station. The family fell apart, some marrying and some hiring out, the last three going to the county orphanage.

Audie enlisted in the Army at Greenville, Texas, in 1942. Nine months later his company went overseas to Casablanca. They hit the beach in the July, 1943, landing at Sicily, fought doggedly through the island, on to Italy, "up the boot" and into the Anzio beachhead. From there they got to Rome for a week and detoured to take part in the landings in South France. They crossed it in the teeth of desperate Nazi resistance—during which Audie won his Medal of Honor—and ended up in Austria.

Audie and a supply sergeant were the only ones left of the original 235 men in the company. A few had been transferred, the rest killed or invalided out. Audie had won his lieutenant's bars and been wounded three times.

A sniper who got him through the hip—giving him a semi-disabled rating today, plus $86 a month pension—also killed his best

Lt. Murphy

1955: Murphy recreates the action, and relives the terrible anguish, of his combat days during the filming of his story, "To Hell and Back."

friend. Audie paid that debt back personally before he went to the rear, a delay that made his own wound gangrenous.

These were the highlights of the story that the Army asked him to sell to Hollywood and star in. "I wanted to do the Army a favor because I owed it so much," says Audie. "I have to admit I love the damned Army. It was father, mother, brother to me for years. It made me somebody, gave me self-respect."

Audie, who has a fierce modesty, wanted to be sure he was not lionized on the screen. So before he sold his book to U-I, he made specific conditions.

The picture had to be authentic. It was not to be the story of himself but of his unit—Company B, 15th Infantry Regiment, Third Division. There was to be no mention of Audie as a Medal of Honor winner.

The studio wanted to show a vignette of every one of the two dozen actions in which he received medals. Audie got them cut down to three and sliced out all mention of medals except as a "decoration."

His own feeling today is that he never personally won them. Once, in a rare burst of sentimentality, he said: "I feel as if they handed their decorations to me and said: 'Here, Murph, hold these!' "

Audie fought with the director and producer of the picture nearly

every day of the seven weeks it was shooting. There were some incredible scenes he wanted out or changed —and he had his way most of the time.

One concerned an Indian and a Pole in Company B. The Pole was not even an American citizen. He and the Indian were close friends, tough as a pair of boots, and two of the best soldiers Audie ever saw.

The Pole was killed because of a portable stove he carried on his belt. It was always getting hung up on bushes or fences when he ran for cover. It got hung up once too often.

Someone found the stove after they buried him. He came in yelling: "Look, we can have hot coffee!"

The Indian grabbed it and went outside. Audie followed him. The big Indian was weeping as he buried the stove.

In the movie Audie was asked to say: "Okay, chief, go ahead, get it out of your system."

"You don't say that," Audie insisted. "You shut up and get out."

Audie thinks his movie might be poor for civilians but good for soldiers—because it shows an outfit in combat. "Out of combat," he says, "the American soldier is one of the laziest on earth. Once he has to go, he's the best. But with the kid-glove way of training that is the rule today, I don't know.

"On location in Yakima, I used to hear captains ask a private to 'please' carry out an order.

"*Please?* A bullet can buzz a couple hundred yards in the time it takes to be polite!"

In spite of the fact that Audie is officially credited with killing 240 of the enemy, it would be wrong to tab him as a killer. He is resentful of any such designation.

He says that the only time he got "killing-mad" was when the sharpshooter killed his buddy. "That was a personal score to settle. I only went off the rail that once."

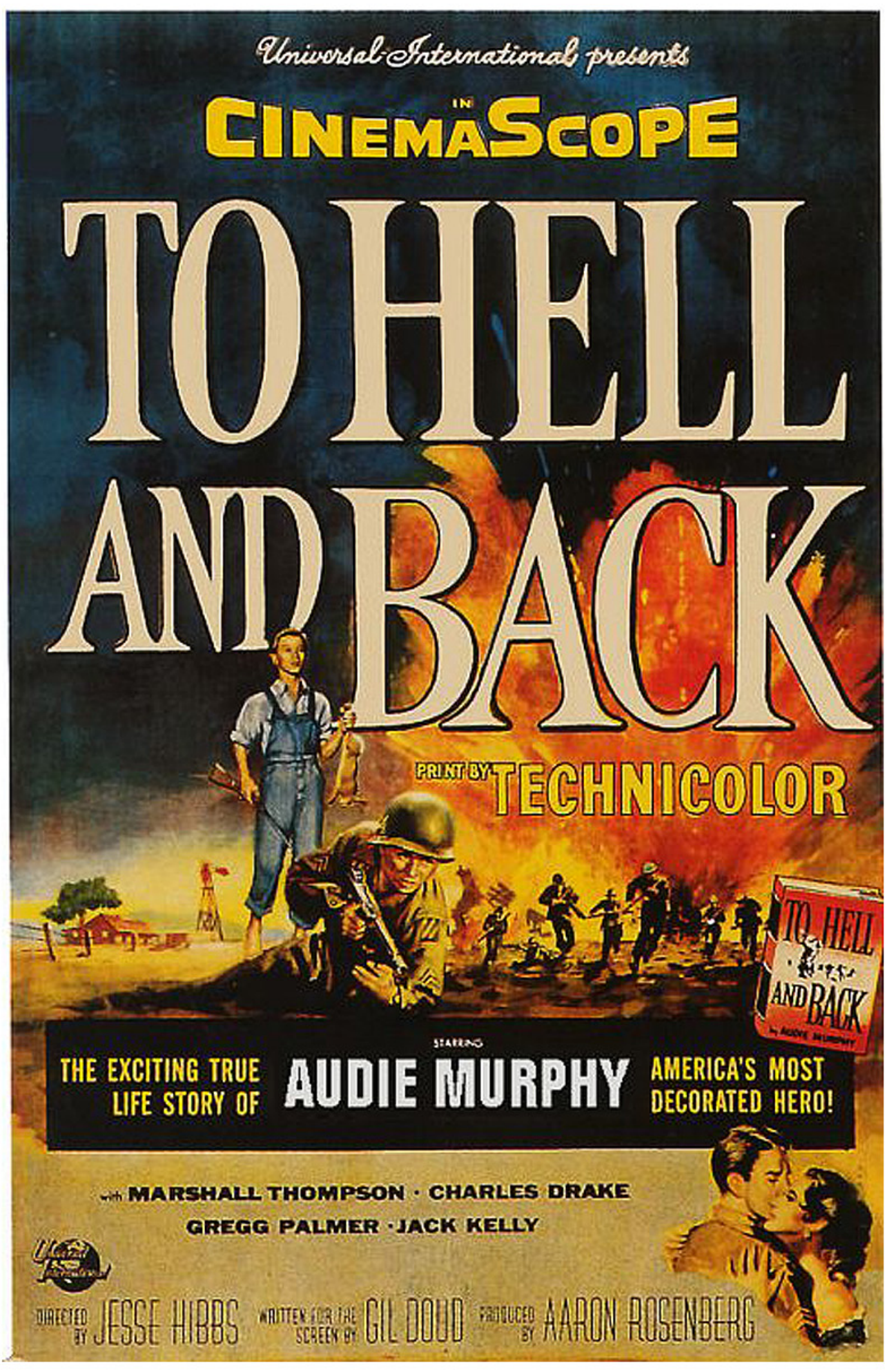
Audie's postwar career shows the truth of what he claims. Though he used to be immensely fond of hunting, he is becoming more of a camera bug. He cannot bear to shoot deer. He is fond of horses and wants to retire to a ranch to breed them. His prime passion is children. "These are the critters worth living for," he says.

While his experiences in motion pictures have deepened his cynicism and given an edge to his humor, Audie's tolerance of people has also broadened. Even the scars from his first marriage—to a movie starlet, Wanda Hendrix—have worn off. Incompatible from the start, it lasted a year and a half

says: "If it comes to where we have to fight, air power is our big bet."

Whether his past career will be as affecting on the screen as it was to him in real life, Audie does not know. Nor does he really care very much. His favorite quote on movie critics under such circumstances is the way a buddy put it just before he went into his last action:

"Come on! They can kill me but they can't eat me!"



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