

## This Day in History... January 26, 1945

# Audie Murphy Earns Medal of Honor

On January 26, 1945, Audie Murphy single-handedly held off an entire company of German soldiers at the Colmar Pocket in France. His incredible courage under fire not only saved his unit from destruction but also earned him the Medal of Honor, making him a lasting symbol of American heroism in World War II.

Born in Texas on June 20, 1925, Audie Murphy dropped out of school in fifth grade to pick cotton for a dollar a day to support his family. He was also good with a rifle so he hunted small game to feed the family.

Following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Murphy, who had always wanted to be a soldier, immediately tried to enlist. But every branch turned him down because he was underweight and underage. He then lied about his age and was accepted into the Army. Murphy excelled from the start, earning the Marksman and Expert Badges.



*The Distinguished Service Cross was first awarded in 1918.*

Murphy had been out of service for three months after getting shot in the hip. He returned to fight on January 14, 1945, and led his men to the town of Holtzwihr, where they came under a heavy German attack. Though Murphy was wounded in both legs, he continued on and was made commander of Company B.



*Cagney was the fifth honoree in the Legends of Hollywood series.*

Murphy first entered service in the Mediterranean Theater in Casablanca, French Morocco. After a promotion, he served as a division runner during the invasion of Sicily. In the coming months Murphy participated in several scouting missions, often coming into contact with enemy forces. On more than one occasion his team was ambushed, but successfully managed to fight off their attackers.

During a mission in Anzio, Murphy and his platoon took out the entire crew of a passing German tank. Murphy then crawled out to the tank by himself to destroy it. He later earned the Bronze Star with "V" Device for this action. In the summer of 1944, after landing on Yellow Beach in southern France, Murphy's platoon came under attack by German soldiers. He then advanced on a house holding German soldiers while under fire and ended up killing six, wounding two, and taking 11 prisoners. He earned the Distinguished Service Cross for this action.

While Murphy earned a number of awards and honors during the war, one of his most famous came in January 1945 at the Colmar Pocket. The pocket was a 40-mile long and 30-mile deep semi-circle the Germans held in Alsace, centered around the town of Colmar.

Still trapped in Holtzwihr waiting for reinforcements on January 26, 1945, Murphy ordered his men to retreat to the nearby woods. Meanwhile, he remained at his post all by himself under direct enemy fire. While he shot his M1 carbine, he also ordered artillery fire over his field radio. Eventually Murphy climbed atop an abandoned and burning tank destroyer and used its .50 caliber machine gun to take out an entire squad that was crawling toward him.

Murphy bravely remained atop the tank for about an hour, returning fire on German ground troops and tanks. Even after he was shot in the leg he continued to fire until he ran out of ammunition. In all he killed or wounded 50 Germans. Once he was out of ammunition, Murphy then returned to his men. He insisted on leading them back to the Germans, and stayed with his men while his wound was treated. Murphy received the Medal of Honor for his bravery that day and his division received the Presidential Unit Citation.

In July 1945 Murphy was honored on the cover of *Life* magazine as the "most decorated soldier." Actor James Cagney saw this and brought him to Hollywood, beginning a 20-year career that lasted from 1948 to 1969. During that time Murphy made more than 40 movies and even played himself in *To Hell and Back*, which was based on his book of the same name and told the story of his World War II experiences.



*From the Distinguished Soldiers set.*



*Stamp pictures the Army, Air Force, and Navy/Coast Guard/Marines Medals of Honor.*

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