

# Missing Angel of a Legendary Soldier

by Harry Steingrubey, 399-C

In the fall of 1945 I was part of the Army of Occupation in Kassel, Germany with the 30th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Division, HQ Company.

I had experienced the combat infantryman's dream. Transfer to rear echelon duty from a line company to HQ. From rifle scout to company clerk, from private to sergeant. My talents had been recognized a bit late. The war had been over since May, but this dogface had enough soldiering!

Still nursing combat fatigue from six months of war duty with the 100th ID, the change was needed—rest and recuperation for me. I was selected as part-time bartender at the regimental NCO club. It was in the performance of this duty that I met and befriended an already famous 3rd ID legend who was destined to become a national hero. This is that story:

Early one evening while on duty, two nondescript soldiers entered the bar and asked for a beer. Apparently together, they weren't a matched pair. The youthful appearance of the short soldier led me to believe he was a recent recruit fresh from the states. His face didn't reveal past combat stress. Mild mannered, he was of slight build and spoke quietly. His associate was the opposite. Tall, rawboned, rugged, late thirties, the John Wayne type. Both wore unkempt Khaki without jackets or ties, were unshaven, caps askew, and had no visual signs of rank or outfit. One thing was for sure. They had been drinking! After a quick analysis of the visual data I informed them that they were in the NCO club and that we did not serve enlisted men. (I had just recently sewed on my sergeant stripes after over two years as private and had become a bit prejudiced about rank, especially privates attempting to crash an NCO club!) This was apparent in my voice as I now informed them, using my best command tone, to leave. This edict caused an unusual silence at the bar. The old 3rd Division NCO club patrons were perhaps expecting a reaction from the two misfits that the brash new bartender, pulling his recently gained rank, had banished. They left quietly. Master Sergeant Huntley, president of the Club Board who had been sipping a beer at the end of the bar asked, "You know who you just threw out Steingrubey?" Before I could answer he said, "They were the two highest-decorated soldiers in the 3rd Division. They'll be back, you'll find out!"

My wait wasn't long. Two hours later they returned. Not the same two I had ordered out, they were now clean shaven and in full regulation dress uniform. The smaller of the two had a chest full of ribbons: four above the Purple Heart with a French and Belgian Croix De Guerre below. He didn't bother to add the Good Conduct or Campaign awards. The two ribbons above the Bronze and Silver Stars were not familiar but their placement in the group identified them as the Distinguished Service Cross and the Medal of Honor! He wore 1st lieutenant bars. His rugged companion's entire left sleeve was full of stripes and bars. Master sergeant followed by seven overseas bars and six hash marks. His decorations were the same as the lieutenant's, except the Medal of Honor, but his Purple Heart had a silver star on it, designating five awards. The lieutenant immediately introduced himself as Audie Murphy and his friend as Sergeant "Hoppi" Roberts. Somewhat intimidated by the two "Heroes" I informed the lieutenant that his friend could stay but as an officer he could still not be served! I hadn't heard of either one of them.

The other patrons of the Club had been waiting for this return engagement and were aghast at my retort to their Icon, Audie Murphy, especially Master Sergeant Huntley, who had allowed the out-of-uniformed lieutenant to drink in the Club. (I later learned Murphy had been a sergeant most of his Army career, earned a battlefield commission late in the war, but preferred the camaraderie of his old peers.) Audie asked me to step outside with him.

Expecting the worst, I took my apron off and preceded him out the door. I felt I could probably handle this little Irishman if the big sergeant didn't follow—perhaps! Outside, seeing me preparing to defend myself, Audie quickly informed me, "No Sergeant, I didn't ask you out here to fight. I wanted to commend you on your actions. You were correct both times. First when I appeared to be an enlisted man and now showing off my rank and decorations. I'm glad you didn't know me. Your adherence to military

regulations should be rewarded. I'm asking you to be my guest at the Officers' Club. They'll overlook their restrictions for me."

That evening was not the last spent with Audie, swapping war stories and toasting the heroes of the war, in Audie's words, "The dead." When asked, he attributed his many decorations to longevity, stating that in addition to laudable qualities of courage, initiative, and aggressiveness, one had to stay alive! He constantly credited the "Angel on my shoulder" for bringing him through the war. As fate would have it, in 1968, a working associate of mine to whom I had related this story, was from Ft. Worth, Texas and on occasion attended an annual social gathering at a millionaire's ranch in Texas where Hollywood celebrities, especially John Wayne and Audie Murphy, were usually in attendance. Ironically he was returning to attend the "big bash" that year and told me if Audie was there he would relate my story (which I doubted he believed) to Audie and tell him where I could be reached.

Several weeks later at the office answering a call in my usual manner, "Steingrubey," there was a long silence followed by, "Formerly Sergeant Steingrubey of the 3rd Division!" (It was obvious the party on the line had been drinking. I wondered who from my Army past had caught up with me now. I was from St. Louis, Missouri. Few other than my family knew I was in Atlanta, my third company transfer point in five years.) As I wondered, I replied, "The same." Another pause, the party continued, "Sergeant, I'm out-of-uniform, have no rank showing, and have been drinking for two days. Can I get a damn drink at your NCO Club?" then laughed and continued, "I can't? Military regulations? Let's you and I go outside." Pause. "This is Audie, how the hell are you Steingrubey?" We relived our after-the-war experiences in Kassel, Germany. It was obvious he was depressed as he related that things hadn't gone well for him in recent years: a failed marriage, a career that soured in Hollywood after his movie "To Hell and Back" and his greatest concern, the "Angel on his shoulder" was gone. He was trying to get right with God again, was planning a cross-country tour of appearances for charitable purposes.

That was his last battle. Within months after our phone conversation, Audie Murphy, most decorated soldier of WWII was dead, a plane crash on tour. The soldier I had refused to serve in the NCO Club not once but twice many years ago was now, in his own words, a true hero.

Holiday 2004 Association Newsletter