

Hollywood's Failure to Immortalize Gabryszewski

by Norman Berdichevsky (November 2014)



Franciszek Gabryszewski in flight suit

We need American heroes today more than ever, yet the lack of any single name in Korea, Vietnam or Iraq to match those of Sergeant Alfred York and Audie Murphy is a telling indication of how those conflicts did not generate the need for the hero worship of the two world wars and portends the disinterest of the public on glorifying American combat heroism. Two classic American heroic films are “Sergeant York” and “To Hell and Back.”

The film Sergeant York (MGM) released in 1941 culturally and psychologically prepared the American public for the ominous struggle ahead by reminding them that this nation had produced incredible acts of valor and heroism by simple American citizens inflamed with the belief in just war and American patriotism. Its star, Gary Cooper (whom the real Alvin York of Tennessee insisted was the only actor capable of playing him on the screen) went on to win the Academy Award for Best Actor for his portrayal. The film also won awards for Best Film Editing and was nominated in nine other categories, including Best Picture, Director (Howard Hawks), Supporting Actor (Walter Brennan), and Supporting Actress (Margaret Wycherly). The American Film Institute ranked the film 57th in its 100 most inspirational American movies. It also rated Alvin York 35th in its list of the top 50 heroes in American cinema.

The dramatic story stirred the nation in its presentation of the real life conflict of conscience that York underwent in at first refusing to serve for the religious reasons of being a conscientious objector – indeed the most stirring non-battle scene in the film is Cooper's rendition of his appearance at the revival meeting when he is swayed by the hymn of “Give Me That Old Time Religion.” In 2008, the film was selected for preservation in the United States National Film Registry by the Library of Congress and defined as “culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant.”

Alvin York also had the appeal of being an “All American” (WASP) character from the Appalachian Hill Country, typifying the strong silent type, a he-man and yet devoutly

religious who, while fasting and pondering, is given a sign from heaven by a breeze that blows his Bible open to the verse "Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's." York dutifully reports back for duty convinced that divine revelation has enabled him to serve his country and protect his fellow soldiers and trusting that God's wisdom and mercy will lead him safely through the trials to come.

"To Hell and Back" was the successful Universal-International 1955 film that starred Audie Murphy as himself based on his 1949 autobiography of the same name and is an account of Murphy's war experiences as a soldier in the U.S. Army. In many respects, in spite of an arch Irish family name, Audie grew up in a remarkably similar background to that of Alvin York, in a large, poor Baptist sharecropper family in Texas, the grandson of a Confederate veteran. His father deserted the family in 1939 leaving his mother unable to care and feed her nine children. As the eldest son, Audie Murphy, worked from an early age to help support his siblings. Following the death of his mother in 1941 he became head of the family. His brothers and sisters were sent to an elder sister and Murphy enabled her to support them with his GI pay.

Audie, like Alvin, was good looking but very short and with a baby face that would have excluded him from playing any role as a heroic soldier had his story not been the dramatic truth. Audie was rejected by the Marines, the Navy, and the Army paratroopers due to his small size and youthful appearance, eventually winning acceptance only in the Army as an ordinary infantryman. His looks made him the butt of sarcastic remarks by fellow soldiers in the Third Infantry Division in North Africa. Again, this scenario is the incredible background to Audie's achievements that would make him the most decorated American soldier in history. Truth is stranger than fiction and Hollywood had to play catch-up ball but the public, knowing the truth flocked to see a real life hero and not a professional well groomed actor.

During his many battles in Africa, Sicily, Italy and France, culminating in a feat that earned him the Congressional Medal of Honor, Audie consistently showed incredible determination, innovation and daring by his actions. As German troops closed in on him in an isolated position behind an abandoned M4 Sherman tank, he single-handedly turned back the German attack, thereby saving his company.

No wonder Hollywood succeeded with these two films of "All-American" Heroes and hesitated, only to eventually reject any scenario for a third film that could have and should have been made about a man who would have completed a trilogy of great combat heroes and one, who unlike the previous two, represented a first generation of ethnic-Americans with an unpronounceable name. This is all the more regrettable because, Slavic Americans, Jews, and Blacks all

deserved being given a national screen hero just as courageous but from a totally different background than Murphy and York whose names had become universally known. Even shortening Franciszek Gabryszewski to "Gabbi Gabreski" did not help much or convince Hollywood that America's most successful flying Ace deserved to be represented on the screen -see NER November 2010, "[The Left is Seldom Right](#) and