

Art Imitates Life

THIS IS A STILL FROM THE FILM *TO HELL AND BACK*, WHICH DEPICTED THE WARTIME HEROICS OF MAJ. AUDIE MURPHY, THE MOST-DECORATED U.S. SOLDIER OF WWII

# Real-Life Expendables

Fact is stranger than fiction and a whole lot more badass

BY LT. COL. KELLY CRIGGER, U.S. ARMY

**I**f you think big-budget, special effects-driven Hollywood blockbusters stretch the boundaries of believability, take a look at some of the following factual accounts. If a movie were made of any of these individuals' lives, no one would believe it. Where tough men congregate, those on this list are called "Sir." Though countless acts of uncommon bravery exist in American military history, these examples of modern military badassery showed undaunted courage, staring the enemies of America in the eye and refusing to flinch, even when blood was streaming down their faces.





**Gunnery  
Sgt. Carlos  
“White Feather”  
Hathcock**

The world of military snipers is rife with fantastical tales of the single fatal shot. In this subculture of men hyperattuned to their surroundings, Marine sniper Carlos Hathcock is a legend. Though he no longer holds the record for the longest shot (he recorded a kill at 2,286 meters in 1967, which held the record until 2002), he once crawled more than 1,500 meters over open field for four days to put a round in a North Vietnamese Army (NVA) general’s chest. He once killed another sniper by putting a bullet through his scope. Hathcock volunteered for so many missions during his two tours of duty that his commanding officers had to restrict him to quarters to make him rest.

The highest award the Marines give for marksmanship is named after Hathcock, as is a sniper rifle, the shooting range at Camp Lejeune (North Carolina) and a Marine Corps library in Washington, D.C. Though he doesn’t hold the record for the most kills, there are 93 confirmed enemy combatants who wish they had never run across him. His tally was so high that North Vietnam once put a bounty of \$30,000 on his head.

**Cpl. Alvin C. York**

In 1918 Europe was a cratered wasteland of misery, and many troops died of disease before ever firing a shot in anger. Among these barrens Alvin C. York, an uneducated Tennessee hillbilly, and 16 other soldiers wound up behind enemy lines when they misread their French map. A brief and confusing firefight ensued, which resulted in the temporary surrender of the superior German force. An enemy machine-gun nest overlooking the fracas shouted in German to hit the deck and mowed down the Americans. Nine of the 17 men, including York’s best friend, were killed. A skilled marksman, York immediately charged the hill and silenced the machine-gun crew, killing nine Germans and capturing 132 prisoners that he and his comrades marched back to American lines.



FROM TOP: LEW ROBERTSON/GETTY IMAGES; © BETTMANN/CORBIS; AP IMAGES, PG. 77; © BETTMANN/CORBIS

**3,400**

**THE NUMBER OF SOLDIERS (ONE IS A WOMAN) WHO HAVE EARNED THE MEDAL OF HONOR SINCE CONGRESS MADE IT PERMANENT IN 1863**



**Col. James “Nick” Rowe**

Vietnam was the wrong conflict in which to be a prisoner of war. Nick Rowe, an American Special Forces Officer captured in 1963, was a POW for five years under the harshest conditions imaginable. Until his escape in 1968, Rowe was tortured, beaten, starved and kept on the move before he managed to outwit his captors, knock a guard unconscious and make a break for a nearby American Huey helicopter (that almost shot him first). Unbelievably, Rowe’s first request was to re-enter the bush he was held in and engage the NVA based on his intimate knowledge of the area.

Rowe’s harrowing tale is recounted in his book *Five Years to Freedom* (Presidio Press, 1984). In 1981 Col. Rowe was selected to start the Special Forces Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape (SERE) training program at Camp Mackall, North Carolina. A lifelong counterguerilla fighter, Rowe was ambushed and killed by Communist insurgents in the Philippines on his way to work in 1989.

**“THEY’RE ON OUR LEFT, THEY’RE ON OUR RIGHT, THEY’RE IN FRONT OF US, THEY’RE BEHIND US...THEY CAN’T GET AWAY THIS TIME  
— LT. GEN. PULLER**



**Maj. Audie Murphy**

Baby-faced, underage and underdeveloped aren’t characteristics that lend themselves to military badasses. But Texas farmhand Audie Murphy overcame those hindrances to become larger than life during and after WWII. Murphy was awarded a Bronze Star at Salerno for knocking out a tank, a Silver Star for saving his platoon during an ambush, the Distinguished Service Cross in southern France for clearing out



several machine-gun nests, and the Medal of Honor in Holtzwihr for stopping an armored Nazi assault while suffering a recurring case of malaria, a shattered heel and a sniper’s bullet in his hip. Murphy killed an estimated 240 enemy combatants during the nine major campaigns in which he fought.



**Lt. Gen. Lewis B. “Chesty” Puller**

Even among the most battle-hardened U.S. Marines, Lewis Puller’s name is revered. After battling Caco rebels in Haiti in 1919 and Nicaraguan bandits in 1930, and spending two quiet tours of duty in China, Puller’s career kicked into high gear when World War II broke out. For three years he led the Marines in the bloodiest battles of the Pacific, hacking his way through Japanese infantry, and earning five Navy Crosses and two sniper bullets along the way. During the Korean War, Puller was in command of the 1st Marine Regiment during the Inchon landings, where he was awarded a Silver Star for bravery under fire. It was while surrounded by North Korean and Chinese troops at the Battle of Chosin



Reservoir that he uttered his famous line, “They’re on our left, they’re on our right, they’re in front of us, they’re behind us... they can’t get away this time.” And in a disagreement over the ownership of some Army equipment, Puller allegedly told an Army colonel: “It has USMC [U.S. Marine Corps] markings on it now and if you want it back, kick my ass.” No challenge was made thereafter.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: AP IMAGES; © BETTMANN/CORBIS (2); COURTESY U.S. NAVY; © BETTMANN/CORBIS

## Col. Aaron Bank

Fluent in German and French, Aaron Bank enlisted in the Army at age 37, just before the outbreak of WWII, and immediately volunteered for Special Operations. Bank led an elite, three-man Jedburgh Team that parachuted into Nazi-occupied France, linked up with the French Resistance and fought the Germans from within. He was hand-picked to lead Operation Iron Cross to kill Adolf Hitler, but Hitler beat him to it by committing suicide. After WWII, Bank laid the groundwork for the creation of the Special Forces. In 1952 he became the first commander of the first Special Forces Group, earning his rightful legacy as the father of Special Operations. Bank swam daily in the Pacific Ocean well into his 80s and lived to be 101 years old.

## Maj. Richard Winters

When your exploits stand out in one of the most gruesome periods in human history, you're a whole new breed of badass. Parachuting into Normandy the night before D-Day, Richard Winters pieced together all the displaced men he could and fought his way through German units to link up with his regiment. The next day he was given the task of neutralizing four German artillery units that were raking Utah Beach. Winters led a squad that destroyed the guns and killed 15 Germans, allowing the Allied Forces to maneuver unobstructed across the beach (an operation still studied by West Point cadets). But D-Day was just the beginning. Winters took command of Easy Company, 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment,



which was the subject of Stephen Ambrose, PhD's, best-selling book *Band of Brothers* (Simon & Schuster, 2001) and the HBO miniseries of the same name. Winters repeatedly proved he was a combat leader who straddled the line between tactical genius and crazy-brave as the 101st endured one of the coldest winters on record as they trudged across Europe on foot.



## Col. Robert Howard

Despite the bland name, Robert Howard earned every medal for valor the U.S. has to offer. During five tours in Vietnam,

Howard was nominated for the Medal of Honor three times, a feat no other American serviceman can claim. He finally earned it after a grueling rescue mission that went wrong when his small force was ambushed by superior numbers of North Vietnamese soldiers. In the initial ambush Howard was wounded and his weapon destroyed by an enemy grenade. Unable to walk, he crawled to retrieve his platoon leader, who was gravely wounded and exposed to enemy fire. After dragging him to safety, Howard then led his men to establish a defensive perimeter, and repulsed attack after attack for three hours while severely wounded and suffering a second injury when an ammunition magazine on his belt exploded. Despite his injuries, Howard was the last man to leave the battlefield when American helicopters finally evacuated his force.

Because many of his missions were part of the über-classified Military Assistance Command, Vietnam – Studies and Observations Group (MACV-SOG), two of his Medal of Honor nominations were downgraded to the Distinguished Service Cross, though they were no less heroic moments. Wounded 14 times (though he received only eight purple hearts), Howard also earned a Silver Star and four Bronze Stars for valor, making him the most decorated soldier since WWII. **M&F**

FROM LEFT: DMITRI KESSEL/GETTY IMAGES; COURTESY ROBERT L. HOWARD TRIBUTE, RLHTRIBUTE.COM