A picture containing text, person, sitting, person

Description automatically generated

Col. Preston J.C. Murphy was a United States Army officer in the 45th Infantry Division who, during WWII and the Korean War, was a Battalion Commander and Regiment Commander. He was on the front lines of the European campaign with the 45th Division, known as the “Thunderbirds”, which had over 500 days of combat during WWII.11   The 45th Division was proclaimed by General George S. Patton, Jr. to be “one of the best, if in fact not the best Infantry Division in the history of American Arms.”11

**Early Life**

Murphy was born on Dec. 5, 1901, in Slocan City, B.C., Canada as the youngest of 4 children. His father was the proprietor of the Two Friends Silver Mine in British Columbia which required him to be gone most of the time. His father drowned in the Nass River in 1909 while returning on a raft from a prospecting trip, leaving a wife and 4 children. At 17 years old, Murphy left Canada to live with his uncle who owned Murphy Ready Clothing Store in Ft. Collins, Colorado. Almost immediately after arriving in Fort Collins, Preston became well known throughout the town for his rich baritone voice, and the local newspaper often mentioned his performances under the society column. Preston participated in many of the social events taking place throughout Fort Collins. In Fort Collins, Murphy enlisted in the Colorado National Guard in 1921, and married Esther Wilkins on July 4, 1925, and became an official United States citizen on Jan. 6, 1926. In the fall of 1931, Preston and his brother Derris were instrumental in developing a senior hockey league appointing Preston as the President. They named it the Fort Collins Crystals and named their newly constructed rink, the Crystal Rink.3

Col. Preston J.C. Murphy-Austin, TX

The Ft. Collins Crystals-Preston Murphy far right

**World War II**

**Training US 1940-1943**

The 45th Division consisting of National Guard units in Colorado, Oklahoma, Arizona, and New Mexico was activated for WWII on Feb. 16, 1940, to begin training at Ft. Sill, Oklahoma, and then went to Brownwood, TX and participated in the VIII Corps Texas Maneuvers, moved to Mansfield, Louisiana for the Louisiana Maneuvers, moved to Camp Barkeley, TX where they were designated the 45th Infantry Division on Sept. 6, 1940.

They then trained at Fort Devens, MA, and Pine Camp, NY, transferred to Camp Pickett, VA, and staged at Camp Patrick Henry. After 3 years of intense training in the United States, the 45th Division departed Camp Patrick Henry on May 26, 1943, and arrived in North Africa June 22, 1943.2,14

**Training North Africa**

After making a practice D-Day amphibious landing, the Thunderbirds sailed again in secrecy moving east along the North African coast where the seals were broken, and the secret orders were read. Each soldier learned that he would land fighting as a part of the 7th Army, commanded by the colorful and brilliant soldier, Gen. George S. Patton, Jr.14P9

**Sicily**

Murphy began WWII as a Battalion Commander commanding the first battalion of the 157th Infantry Regiment. Lt. Col. Murphy and his men made an amphibious landing on the island of Sicily on July 10, 1943. His conduct at the “Battle of Bloody Ridge” in Northern Sicily won him the Silver Star medal for gallantry in action.3(Chap.WWII)   While his battalion was engaged in attacking an important ridge strongly held by the enemy, Lt. Col. Murphy made his way from his forward observation post accompanied by two platoons of his leading company, under heavy enemy artillery and machine gun fire, to an exposed vantage point. From this point, and while under continual enemy fire, Murphy directed the successful maneuver of his battalion. His prompt and courageous action without regard for personal safety, supplied the inspiration that caused his troops to assault the ridge and hold it against a strong enemy counterattack.16

Murphy’s battalion was the only 45th battalion to enter Messina, Sicily with General Patton prior to the arrival of the British Army and participated in the welcoming committee for Field Marshal Montgomery, closing the Sicilian campaign.1,14 P10,11

**Salerno**

After Sicily, the Division was detached from the 7th Army and assigned to the 5th Army for the Italian campaign under command of Lt. Gen. Mark W. Clark.14P21

On Sept. 10, 1943, exactly 2 months after the Sicilian invasion, the Division embarked for Italy.14P21 Murphy landed at Salerno and was involved in heavy fighting at Ponte Sele and the Tobacco Factory.2

**Monte Cassino**

After advancing through Sicily in only two months and making their 2nd amphibious landing in Salerno, Italy, the US Fifth Army under Gen. Mark Clark linked up with the British Eighth Army under Gen. Bernard Montgomery and continued to advance north with the Americans on the left flank and the British on the right. The Germans had rapidly retreated into the mountains and foothills taking advantage of Italy’s mountains and rugged terrain where narrow hairpin turns were the only means of advancement. Allied progress was abruptly brought to a halt along the heavily fortified ‘Gustav Line’ which stretched east to west coast to coast. Cassino lay in the 45th Div. sector with the mountain of Monte Cassino looming above it, that controlled access to Rome. Repeated attempts to push through failed as winter weather closed in.

To break the deadlock, High Command planned another amphibious operation, code named ‘Shingle’ which would take place alongside a renewed offensive utilizing two Divisions, the 3rd and 45th of Clark’s Fifth Army, with the remainder staying behind in Cassino to simultaneously attack from the South. The plan was an “end run” at sea around the German front lines landing behind the lines about 30 miles south of Rome with plans to attack the Gustav Line from the North.<https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/anzio-the-invasion-that-almost-failed>

Lt. Col. Murphy was next assigned as 179th Regiment Executive Officer just before Anzio.

**Anzio**

The Thunderbirds assaulted Anzio, Italy Jan. 22, 1944, on their 3rd amphibious landing. By the end of the day, 36,000 American and British troops and 3,200 vehicles had been brought ashore. They initially surprised the Germans and met little resistance, but the Germans were quick to react and by Jan. 25, elements of five divisions – 40,000 German troops had surrounded the Allied beachhead. The result was a stalemate with continued fighting for the next four months with casualties as high as 70%.<https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/anzio-the-invasion-that-almost-failed>

Lt. Col. Murphy earned his second Silver Star medal for gallantry in action Feb. 18-19,1944 in the “Battle of the Caves” on the Anzio beachhead. 12 The main German offensive against the Anzio Beachhead had driven back the forward elements of the regiment and the enemy was attacking the regiment’s main line of resistance. The attack by enemy infantry and armor, strongly supported by artillery and airplanes, had been maintained for two days and continued both day and night on Feb. 18-19. During this time, Lt. Col. Murphy moved about the regimental position under heavy fire. He visited front line units, checking their location and condition, and coordinating the defense. By the orders and encouragement, and the personal example he set, he displayed gallantry in action.15

He was acting commander of the 179th Regiment for the first time on April 3, 1944, following the transfer of Col. William O Darby.14 P62 He commanded the regiment until May 2, 1944, when he returned to Executive Officer of the regiment. On May 11,1944, the US and British forces launched Operation ‘Diadem’ and finally broke through at Cassino and continued the drive to liberate Rome. On June 16, 1944, the division was withdrawn for rehabilitation.2

**Southern France**

Murphy was next involved in his 4th amphibious landing in the assault of Ste Maxime, southern France on Aug. 15, 1944, shortly after the D-Day attack in northern France at Normandy in a strategy to pinch the Germans & force retreat into Germany.

**Meximieux**

As the 45th Division, 179th Regiment sped across southern France in pursuit of the retreating German forces, the 179th was split into two groups with Col. Meyers, Regiment CO leading part of the regiment to the North and Lt. Col. Murphy, Regiment XO leading the other part to the south into the village of Meximieux. Murphy had the aid of soldiers in the FFI (French Foreign of the Interior), the French underground fighters.

In the early morning of Sept. 1, 1944, about 1,000 men of the 15th and 11th German Panzer Regiment attacked the village to push the 179th Regiment out while protecting the retreating German flank. The American forces were greatly outnumbered. Murphy coordinated the defense of the city directing the 1st Battalion CO Lt. Col. Michael Davison, and the FFI as the battle raged on. At the height of the battle the German command presented Murphy with the option of surrender. His response was the Americans would stand and fight.

1st Battalion, with only two Tank destroyers and a small number of men, and the FFI were able to hold their positions and destroy six enemy tanks. The battle continued all day and into the night. The attack on the city was rebuffed with great losses to the German Regiment. The following morning, Murphy advised Division HQ that Meximieux was secure.

The Americans suffered 11 casualties, while the German Regiment suffered 350 killed or wounded and had 6 tanks destroyed and many more damaged.

When Murphy returned in 1970 to visit with his wife, the mayor of Meximieux made him an honorary citizen and held a grand parade and said, “it is the honor of my term as mayor to have received the leader to whom Meximieux owes its liberty.”7

Shortly thereafter as the regiment moved swiftly across France, Lt. Col. Murphy assumed command of the 179th Regiment on Oct. 6, 1944. On Dec. 7, 1944, Murphy received a battlefield promotion to full colonel and continued to command the regiment for the remainder of WWII, and during the post war occupation (except for a brief period when the regiment was temporarily commanded by Lt. Col. William P. Grace while Murphy was recuperating from being wounded in Nuremberg.) 1,14P99At 43, the Ft. Collins officer was one of comparatively few National Guard officers to attain a regimental command in either World War.10,14P99

Col. Murphy continued to advance across France. One night his regimental command post was raided at night by a German patrol which captured several American officers. Others, including Murphy, had sufficient warning of the attack to permit them to disappear into the darkness. “I heard some German ask, in perfect English, ‘Where’s that damn colonel?’” Murphy wrote in a letter to his wife.13

**Germany**

Murphy was wounded April 16, 1945, in the Battle of Nuremberg.1 Col. Murphy & another officer had been observing the progress of the leading assault units when their observation post was suddenly shelled by enemy mortars. The first burst hit within feet of the two officers, and both were wounded by shell fragments and evacuated to a hospital in France.14(P122),5(German War Days) Murphy was hit in both legs and one arm, but luckily the wounds were superficial, and he was able to rejoin the regiment after 7 days in the hospital.

During the journey to Munich, they arrived at the famous Dachau Concentration Camp. He told his jeep driver to pull over to see if they could help and they saw the railroad cars full of dead bodies and the emaciated prisoners. Murphy ordered the driver to continue to Munich while 3rd Battalion 157th Regiment, commanded by Lt. Col. Felix Sparks, continued to secure, and liberate the camp.5(Chap.-German War Days)

179th Infantry soldiers in Hitler's Apartment-Life Magazine May 1945
After arriving in Munich, the Regimental Command Post was set up in Adolph Hitler’s private residence apartment, the fourth floor of a five-floor building.14P128 During this time, they discovered a large safe and Murphy sent for a safecracker to open it. Inside they found some papers and two copies of Mein Kampf, the book that Adolph Hitler wrote that means “My Struggle” and was his manifesto of his political thinking.5,8(Lived in Adolph’s Apartment),14 Page XII

179th Regiment Soldiers in Hitlers Apt. - Life Magazine, May 1945

**Mission Complete**

Col. Murphy remained as part of the occupation at the apartment in Munich when hostilities were declared ended on May 7, 1945. It was a fitting climax for the 179th Infantry Regiment, which had played so great a part in bringing about the finish, that it welcomed the war’s termination in Hitler’s own apartment.14(P131)

Text, letter

Description automatically generatedWhile he was there, he penned a letter on Hitler’s private stationary to his friends Cecil and Pearl back in Ft. Collins on May 25, 1945. It reads:

“Dear Cec & Pearl,

Pardon the stationary but the former occupant left in a hurry. These quarters were formerly occupied by the late Adolf. The city is quite badly damaged. Just a note to let you know I am ok again with scars in the most interesting places. Should return to the States before too long. Pres”8

A picture containing text, person, outdoor, old

Description automatically generatedMurphy & all the soldiers in the Division could be proud of themselves, proud of the vital part it had played as a member of the team which was the 45th Division. Any man in the Division could be proud. The Thunderbirds had seen a total of 511 combat days, the record in the European Theater of Operations. They participated in five amphibious landings including Northern Africa, Sicily, Italy, France, and the Rhine River. In that time, they had captured 101,080 enemy soldiers. They had fought in three countries and on every European front, and they had beaten, and beaten soundly, the best divisions the Germans threw at them.14P131

**Post WWII**

After V-E Day, Murphy remained on Active Duty until 1947, mostly as part of the investigation of war crimes in Italy.9 He left active duty in August 1947 and returned to Fort Collins. Like many soldiers before him, life had changed and so had he. His marriage to Esther Wilkins ended in divorce, his uncle had passed away before the war, and his brother had moved away. Murphy sold the clothing store he had inherited and decided to apply to re-activate into the Regular Army.3(Chap.War Ends)He received a commission in the Regular Army in November 1947.9

Col. Murphy presenting awards to men of the 179th Regiment

Murphy was assigned to Caserta, Italy where he met Corinne Hall, a young naval officer 20 years his junior. During WWII Corinne had achieved the rank of Lieutenant JG in the US Navy when she took an assignment to serve in Northern Italy where she met Col. Preston J.C. Murphy in Sorrento, Italy. On Sept. 18,1948 Preston and Corinne were married in the Walter Reed Chapel, Washington D.C. as Murphy prepared to begin his personal life anew at the age of 47 with a new wife .3They proceeded to have 4 children and were married 34 years until his death in 1983.

**Korean War**

A person in a military uniform holding an object in front of a crowd

Description automatically generated with low confidenceIn December 1950, he was assigned to the 45th Infantry Division and served as Chief of Staff through training at Ft. Polk, LA and Hokkaido, Japan. When the Division was alerted for Korea, he was assigned as Commanding Officer, 279th Infantry Regiment. (On Sept. 5, 1946, the division was granted federal recognition with the 279th to replace the 157th) The news of Murphy’s appointment was received with great enthusiasm by the officers and men of the 279th. Murphy was no stranger to the Thunderbirds. He had enlisted in Company H, 157th Infantry in 1921 and had advanced through the ranks during WWII to Regimental Commander and the rank of full Colonel.11

The 279th sailed from Otaru and landed at Inchon on the evening of Dec. 28, 1951 and went into reserve to back up the 179th and 180th regiments. On Jan. 15, 1952, the 279th relieved the 180th on the right flank of the division Sector.11

Col. Murphy spent most of his time with the front-line troops. One incident demonstrated the coolness of Murphy. He was visiting the Second Battalion area with two of his staff members. At one location, he drew a crowd and before anyone realized it there was a swish of an incoming mortar round. The round was a dud and landed a few feet from the party of officers. Murphy looked at the several officers who had instinctively “hit the dirt” and addressed his S-2, “Dugger, when the round arrives with your name on it, you won’t hear the swish.” There were standing orders in the Division that no more than two soldiers would congregate on the skyline.11

Murphy issued a call for volunteers to form a special Raider Platoon. He soon had 32 volunteers. Most of them were ex-rangers and most of them were ex-football players. Second Lieutenant Carl Stevens indicated an interest in the platoon but decided against volunteering and went to Headquarters to inform the Regimental Commander of his decision. He was told that it was too late to change his mind. He asked if he was being ordered to the assignment and when Col. Murphy replied in the affirmative, Stevens smiled, saluted, and replied, “Sir, you couldn’t have picked a better man.” The wisdom of his selection would soon be apparent. The 279th Raider platoon was officially formed to be known as “Stevens Raiders” that would specialize in night raids.Stevens Raiders had several major encounters with the enemy and by the time they had disbanded Lt. Stevens had received the Silver Star and the Raiders collected a total of 11 Bronze Stars and 17 Purple Hearts.11

Murphy commanded the 279th Regiment until September 1952 when he was assigned as Chief of Military History, Far East Command, Tokyo, Japan.1,4

**Post-war years**

Murphy returned to the USA in July 1954 and was assigned as Senior Army Advisor to the Texas Army National Guard, Camp Mabry, Austin, Texas.1,4He retired from the US Regular Army Feb. 28, 1957, with 36 years in uniform, and accepted employment with the Texas Army National Guard Armory Board as Contact Agent from April 1957 to August 1977 with 20 years of service.1

Murphy’s love for music remained with him throughout his lifetime. He performed throughout his military career and after his retirement he was a member of the Austin Civic Chorus. He also played the piano and a few of his favorite songs that he sang with great passion were Ave Maria & Danny Boy.3

On January 6, 1983, Preston J.C. Murphy passed away at the age of 81 years. He is buried at the Fort Sam Houston National Cemetery.3

His distinguished service earned him the Silver Star with Oak Leaf Cluster, the Legion of Merit with Cluster, the Bronze Star with two Clusters, the Purple Heart, and Combat Infantry Badge, and the French Croix de Guerre with Gold Star.1,4,3