
THE DENT ON PRIVATE MURPHY'S FOREHEAD

PETER E MURPHY

THIS FAMILY MEMOIR LOOKS AT FANTASY, LIES AND AMNESIA IN
THE LIVES OF A FATHER AND SON PAIR OF NYC LONGSHOREMEN
STATIONED DURING THE NORMANDY LANDINGS

PHOTOS: AUTHOR'S OWN



(Date Unknown) Eddie Murphy and his father Teddy. From the stripes on his sleeve, it looks like Private Murphy, like his father, was actually Sergeant Murphy. He never told me that. I believe this is the picture that appeared in *Stars & Stripes*.

ALTHOUGH EDDIE MURPHY DIDN'T EARN HIS HIGH SCHOOL EQUIVALENCY diploma until he was in his fifties, he always loved to read. Not just the New York Times which he ripped through every day for most of his adult life, but books, good books, books by Ellison, Graves, Mailer, Percy, Purdy, Thurber, Updike, Waugh. He left whatever paperback he was reading on the window ledge by the front door so he didn't forget it the next morning when he commuted to work, riding the A train from Howard Beach into the city to hoist bricks and mortar and steel to the tops of buildings under construction.

He was a good-looking man with dark wavy hair slicked back. The one imperfection was a dent on his left forehead. I don't know how else to describe it. He told me when I was little, that he was parading a dozen Japanese soldiers that he captured in Germany down 5th Avenue when one of them tried to escape, grabbed his rifle and hit him on the head. 'Daddy was a hero,' I thought. My grandmother told me different. 'He's full of shit,' she said laughing. 'He fell off the back of an ice truck on 10th Avenue when he was eleven.'

Eddie was a great swimmer. He said that during the war they didn't fight on Sundays, so each week he swam the English Channel to France and took the subway back.

'One time,' he said, 'I was off the coast of France, but I was too tired to go on, so I turned around and swam back to England.' When I told this story to my friends, what a great swimmer my father was, they laughed at me and said I was stupid.

'You calling my father a liar?' I yelled, raising my fists.

'You're stupid,' they laughed.

When I turned thirteen or fourteen I became interested in his books for prurient reasons, prurient a word the priests used when trying to talk about sex. I borrowed his books at night and returned them before he left for work. I developed a crush on Clea from Durrell's *Alexandra Quartet*. I didn't know what Helen meant in Malamud's *The Assistant*

when she called Frank an 'uncircumcised dog', but I had a feeling they were about to screw. Humbert Humbert was wrong, I knew, but that didn't mean I wanted him to stop. And then there was Roth. Philip Roth. I lusted over the Monkey. Call me Portnoy!

I learned to read fast because Eddie ripped out the pages he read each day and threw them in the trash.

'How come you do that?' I asked.

'Why carry back and forth what I already read? I'm not going to reread them.' Well, I wanted to reread them, especially the dirty parts.

Eventually, I learned to enjoy books, not just to get off on, but because they're good.

'Dad, have you read *Angela's Ashes*?' I asked decades later.

'Yeah,' he answered. 'I loved the old man.'

'Whose old man?' I asked.

'McCourt's.'

'I don't understand,' I said.

'He was a great guy. What a sense of humour!'

'McCourt's old man? His father?'

'Yes, I enjoyed him.'

'I don't believe it. How can you say that? He was a drunk. He spent all his money on booze. One of his kids starved to death...'

'True, but he never touched her.'

'Never touched who?'

'His wife.'

'I don't understand,' I said again. I said this a lot when talking with my father.

'McCourt's father never laid a hand on Angela. My father Teddy beat the shit out of my mother every night.'

'Grandpa?!'

A few years later I asked if he had seen the movie, *Saving Private Ryan*.

'No,' he said.

'The beginning of it was... when they were landing at Normandy on D-Day... I don't know how to describe... it was a bloodbath. I can't believe that anyone survived.'

'It was pretty awful.'

'I mean... the water, sea water, it's supposed to be historically accurate, actually turned red from so much blood. And those poor guys. As soon as the landing craft ramp lowered they were mowed down by machine guns. The ones who weren't shot jumped in the sea, were pulled down by the weight of their packs and drowned. I don't know how anyone survived.'

'It was terrifying.'

'There was this poor guy who just got blown up wandering around looking for his hand or his foot. I don't remember which... Wait... what do you mean it was terrifying?'

'I was terrified.'

'What are you talking about? I thought you didn't see the movie.'

'I'm talking about Normandy.'

'You were there?'

'I was in the fourteenth wave.'

'What does that mean? Was that like a week or two later?'

'No, the fourteenth wave of landing crafts. First... second... third... fourteenth. We hit the beach that morning.'

'What?'

He got out of his lazy boy and went into his bedroom. Eddie was shy, especially around his kids. Well, not all his kids, but I felt he was shy around me. Maybe shy is the wrong word. Reluctant. Getting him to talk about the past, especially Wales and my mother, was like pushing string up a duck's ass. He came back a few minutes later with two old black and white photographs. They were curled at the corners and yellowing. The first showed three young soldiers lying on the grass. Behind them are rows of little tents, sheets of canvas really, tied to poles stuck in the ground. They look like they were slapped up quickly. Behind the tents are hedgerows and trees.



(June 6, 1944) Eddie Murphy, Dinny Lambert and unknown Soldier in a field above Omaha Beach, early evening of D-Day.

The soldier in the middle is Dinny Lambert, Eddie's best friend growing up, and like him, a longshoreman from Tenth Avenue. Dinny has dark curly hair and you can see it's a mess. Next to him is a man I don't know. He looks exhausted, like he can barely lie down. His arm is draped over Lambert's shoulders. And there's Eddie, leaning up against Lambert's other side.

'What's this?' I ask.

'D-Day,' Eddie says.

'D-Day?'

'D-Day.'

'When, the following week?'

'That night.'

'What night?'

'That night, D-Day, after we landed.'

More bullshit, I thought. How could they be goofing off in front of their tent the night of the invasion? I didn't know much about D-Day, but



(June 6, 1944) Eddie Murphy, holding an egg, Dinny Lambert, holding a tent pole and unknown Soldier holding Dinny Lambert in a field above Omaha Beach, early evening of D-Day.

wouldn't they be fighting their asses off for the next few days? Weeks?

I look at the picture again. I look at Eddie. I don't know how he does it, but there's not a hair out of place. He is smiling. He ought to be smiling. He made it. He's alive. He's not even wounded. That will happen later. I look at the second photo, these same three guys are crammed into one of those little tents, their shoulders and heads are sticking out like baby birds in a nest. It is light out. Mr Anonymous is to the right of Lambert who's in the middle. Both of his hands are on the tent pole as he's holding it up. Maybe he is. Eddie is to the left, a big grin on his face. He is holding an egg between his fingers. An egg.

'Where did you get the egg?'

'A farm woman. She was so happy to see us she handed it to me. I tried giving it back, but she wouldn't take it.'

'How did you survive? What happened?'

'Then we were in Belgium.'

'Wait, how did you get to Belgium?'

'I loved Belgium. What a great place.'

'But... you're confusing me. What happened on D-Day? What happened after that?'

'I loved Belgium, especially Antwerp.'

The first thing Eddie noticed was that something smelled good and that was bad. Since he'd landed at Omaha Beach six months previously very little had smelled good. There was the occasional fresh grass and trees, but mostly the air reeked of burning houses, burning machinery, burning oil and burning flesh. Especially burning flesh. But what he smelled on this particular morning was clean, fresh, alive, the opposite of burning flesh.

He also noticed how much his head hurt. He assumed that this monster headache erupted from a hangover. He had been drunk a lot. These days he was usually drunk. He loved being drunk and was used to paying the price of a hangover, but he'd never had one like this before. His head pounded and it hurt to move, but for the last few months it always hurt to move. Sleeping on the hard ground with two other guys in their dinky tent cramped his joints. As much as he hated home, he sometimes wished he were in his own bed.

He wasn't ready to open his eyes, not yet. He feared the light would kill him. 'Where's Lambert?' he thought. 'Maybe he's got some aspirin.'

'Dinny!' he yelled, but it wasn't much of a yell. It hurt too much. 'Christ, I'm in bad shape,' he thought

'Soldier, how you feeling?' someone asked. A female someone, but that wasn't right either.

'Huh?'

'Soldier, I asked you how you're feeling,' said the voice, definitely female. Definitely American. Eddie figured he was dreaming and tried to open his eyes to make sure. The light did almost kill him.

'Ohhhhh,' he moaned and quickly shut his eyes again. 'Where am I?'

'You are in the field hospital in Antwerp,' the voice said.

'Huh... how... what happened? Am I wounded?'

'Yes. Your jeep was attacked.'

'I have to be dreaming,' Eddie thought. 'I don't have a jeep, and while there have been bombings every day, the V-1 and V-2 Buzz Bombs, there haven't been any German soldiers around here in a while.'

'Let me get the doctor,' the voice said. 'I'll let him know you're awake.' Eddie heard her walk away. Then he noticed other noises, snoring, moaning. He managed to keep his eyes open more than a second. Too much light. But he tried again. And again.

'What am I doing in a hospital?' he thought. 'How bad am I hurt? Am I going to die? Where's Lambert? Where's my father, Teddy?'

Eddie and Teddy's picture had been in the *Stars and Stripes* because it was rare that a father and son served together in the same company. But they were both longshoremen from the West Side of Manhattan so why wouldn't they be stationed together, unloading the flotilla of supply ships that steamed into Antwerp every day? When he enlisted, he hoped that this was his chance to get away from his father. What evil thing had conspired to put them side by side thousands of miles from home? 'Fuck *Stars and Stripes*,' he thought. 'I wish the bastard would just go away.'

Teddy had pulled Eddie from school when he was fourteen to work on the docks. It was 1934 and the Great Depression was raging. Eddie loved to read, loved history. Shit, he even loved math. He thought he might go to college and become a professor, the nickname other longshoremen called him because he usually carried a book around with him. Eddie also loved classical music. He actually saved enough money to buy a used piano which was stuffed into the cramped apartment he shared with his mother and younger siblings. He took piano lessons, which he found boring, but once he learned his scales and got beyond 'Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star', he loved them. There weren't too many longshoremen in the West Side of Manhattan who read books and listened to

Beethoven. There weren't too many longshoremen whose goal was to perform at Carnegie Hall. I don't know how he got this way.

He and Lambert had been raising hell in Antwerp a few miles from their base. They had a curfew and were certainly going to miss it, again. Eddie mostly obeyed the rules, tried not to get into trouble, but Lambert didn't give a fuck. He was out to have a good time, and Eddie was having a good time too, which surprised the shit out of him. Here he was in the middle of the biggest war in history and he was having the best time of his life. Although he was nearby, his father could no longer tell him what to do. The Army did that, and Eddie loved the army more than he loved his old man. The army never lied to him. The army never beat him up. It fed him. It trained him to do what he was expected to do and he did it.

'Let's take a jeep and drive back,' Lambert said. 'It'll save a walk.'

'No way,' Eddie protested. 'I'm not stealing a jeep. They'll court marshal us.' He set off on foot back to base, leaving Lambert to his devilry.

Eddie was drunk and cold. He put his gloved hands in his coat pockets and stumbled along the snow-covered road. It was December, 1944, just before the Battle of the Bulge, but no one knew that then. Eddie suspected that they would be launching an attack against Germany soon. It was obvious from what they were unloading from the ships. He wouldn't mind staying in Antwerp, operating his crane, unloading his ships while someone else did the fighting. He was tired. He was old. He was twenty-four.

'Hey soldier, wanna ride?' Eddie hadn't noticed the jeep pull up next to him. Good thing it wasn't a German or he'd be dead.

'Sure,' he said, grateful for the offer, but when he climbed in, about to thank the driver, he saw that it was Lambert.

'Let me out,' Eddie said. Instead Lambert sped up along the icy road and told Eddie to relax, they would be at the base in a minute. There was nothing to worry about.

'Besides,' said Lambert, 'look in the back.' Eddie turned around and

saw six cases of whiskey.

'What the.... Where did you get that?' he asked.

'Fell off a truck,' Lambert said.

'Christ,' Eddie said. 'They're not just gonna court marshal us. They're gonna put us in front of a firing squad.' That's all that he remembered.

Eddie was a serious man who worked hard and tried to do the right thing. He grew up poor and had few pleasures, music and beer among them. He wasn't a womanizer, but the women in Belgium were so grateful for the little gifts that the Americans gave them, chocolate, soap, tins of rations, and they showed their gratitude. He was having a blast. He hoped the war would go on forever.

Eddie had gotten engaged when stationed in Wales six months before the Normandy Landings. He arrived in Newport around January, 1944, and had been operating a crane, hoisting pallet after pallet of war supplies out of the ships onto the waiting trucks. This was the easiest work he had ever done. He loved Thelma, he thought, when he was with her, but did he love her now? Did he love her enough to take her back to New York? Did he want to spend the rest of his life with her? It was too quick, he realized. What did he know about getting married, especially to a foreigner?

He'd met Thelma the night Lambert told him he knew a pub where they played real classical music. Eddie thought he was bullshitting him but he was game. They showed up at the Windsor Castle Hotel sometime in February.

As he approached the bar to order his beer, Eddie saw a piano in a room off to the side. He wondered who played it and when they would begin. He wondered if they would let him play, but he hadn't practised in months so he'd only embarrass himself if they did.

'What can I get you, luv?' Eddie saw the dark-haired girl behind the bar and was smitten. He looked at her so intensely that she blushed and turned to Lambert, 'How about you, luv?'



(October 1945) Thelma Elias Samuel, aged 20, in Newport. Handwriting on the back says, "Two things of beauty, and joys forever. Thelma and Berle (?)."

Eddie composed himself and said, 'Pint... please...what's your name?' The young woman didn't answer as she reached for a large glass and pulled the handle several times, pumping his beer.

'Same here,' Lambert said, as she placed the glass in front of Eddie and reached for another.

'What's your name?' Eddie asked again, putting a few shillings on the bar.

'Thelma,' she said, ringing them up, not asking his name. The pub was full of locals. It had not yet been invaded by the Yanks.

'Fancy going to the cinema with me?' Eddie asked. Thelma put his change in front of him and went off to serve another customer, ignoring him and his question.

Lambert said, 'You look like you were hit on the head. You like her, don't you?'

'No I don't,' Eddie said, defensively, 'but she is beautiful.'

Eddie returned to the Windsor Castle Hotel whenever he had leave. Sometimes Lambert went with him. Sometimes he went alone. Thelma served him his beers and ignored him. Eddie tried getting her to talk to

him, but she didn't bite. He became friendly with some of the locals. The landlord, Jim Curran, was a nice guy who introduced him to his younger brother, Peter. He and Eddie hit it off. Jim's wife, Dida was Thelma's big sister. She was protective of Thelma, more like a mother than a sister, but she liked the young American and for the time being, didn't tell Jim to have him leave Thelma alone.

There was classical music, but no one played the piano. It came from a Victrola... no, they called it something different over here, Eddie thought: gramophone. Eddie didn't mind. He was more interested in Thelma than Beethoven. 'How can you tell if you're in love?' he asked Lambert who thought his friend had gone cuckoo. Peter Curran told Eddie he thought he was making progress.

'How can you say that?' Eddie complained. 'She won't even talk to me.'

'You haven't noticed, have you?' Peter said. 'She lingers in front of you, wiping the clean bar and emptying the empty ashtray.'

'Really?' he said, lifting his beer to his lips, missing, and spilling it down his chin onto his shirt. Embarrassed, trying to hide his mistake before Thelma saw it, he reached for his handkerchief, too late. She was in front of him wiping the spilt beer off the bar. Then she took his handkerchief from him and dabbed at his chin, a tiny smile breaking from her soft, red lips.

'You're getting sloppy, luv. No more beer for you.'

When he saw that tiny smile, Eddie knew he had her. They started talking and eventually she did go to the cinema with him. In May, a few weeks before shipping out for Normandy, Eddie managed to buy a diamond ring – they were in short supply at the jewellers on Commercial Street – and asked Thelma to marry him. She said yes. Eddie was afraid that Dida wouldn't approve, but she did, and Jim treated him like a son. Eddie hadn't planned on getting engaged to a Welsh girl. He'd never heard of Wales before he was deployed there. And while he'd had a few girls at home, he hadn't see himself getting married to any of them.



(Date Unknown) Elvira (Dida) and Jim Curran behind the bar of the Windsor Castle Hotel, Newport.

But that had been before D-Day. Now he was in a hospital in Antwerp not knowing if he was going to live or die. He felt like death, so he figured that he was closer to that side than the other one. 'What happened?' he wondered. 'How did I wind up here?'

'How are you feeling, soldier?' someone asked. Eddie opened his eyes and saw a blurry young man in a white coat holding a clipboard.

'Everything hurts,' Eddie said, 'especially my head. Can you give me something, doc?'

'Your head should hurt,' the doctor said. 'You concussed it. Why weren't you wearing your helmet? In case you hadn't noticed, there's a war going on.'

'I was....' Eddie was about to say he'd been out drinking but stopped, not wanting to get in more trouble than he was already in. Better to keep his mouth shut.

'Ohhhhh....' Eddie groaned for effect.

'You also injured your kidneys. We don't know how bad it is yet, but your urine is full of blood. We'll have to do some more tests.'

'Am I going to die?' Eddie asked.

'Yes,' the doctor said, 'but not for a long time. However, for you, the war is over. I'm sending you home.'

Eddie was shocked. 'What?'

'Your injuries are serious. You need time to rest or your kidneys will shut down and kill you. You're going home.'

'No, doc. You can't,' Eddie said. 'I don't want to go home.' This was the worst possible good news. He would have to go back to work on the New York docks but instead of operating a crane, he would be hauling a hundred pounds of bananas on his back up the gangplank, heaving them onto a truck that drove them to a warehouse in Hoboken or Hackensack or some other godforsaken place with a crazy sounding name. He hated that work. Never wanted to do it again. No one bothered him as a soldier. No one tripped him up. No one threatened to drop a pallet of bricks on him if he didn't kick back part of his wages.

'I don't want to go home, doc,' he repeated. 'I want to stay here.'

'Don't be a hero, son,' the doctor said, moving on to his next patient. 'For you, the war is over.'

Eddie wanted to cry. Home was worse than any war. Eddie wondered who he could talk to, tell them he was as fit as anyone. He loved the bars in Antwerp. The beer. The women. He loved being the guy who operated the crane rather than the guy in the shithole with bananas on his back. He was having too much fun. A blast. He didn't want to go home.

Not long after Thelma had accepted the ring, the 185th Port Company was ordered to pack their kits and get ready to ship out. Eddie figured that this was the invasion they had been expecting. He wanted to tell Thelma he would come back to marry her, but no one was allowed off base. 'What will she think if I don't say goodbye?' he wondered.

But instead of heading for the coast, the convoy drove deep into

Wales to the Rhonda Valley near Treorchy. They made camp, and for the next few weeks, they attacked the mountains so that even Eddie, a city kid who had never climbed anything more challenging than a few flights of tenement stairs, could scramble up those cliffs like a cockroach on a kitchen wall.

They returned to their base outside Newport, and after cleaning up and chowing down, Eddie hitched a ride into town. Thelma was behind the bar. Her face brightened when she saw him. She was even more beautiful then he remembered.

'Oh Eddie, luv, you disappeared. I didn't know if I would ever see you again.'

'She's skinny,' he thought, 'but her black eyes are as dark as her long black hair.' Her skin was white as paper and softer than anything he had ever touched. He loved her and couldn't believe she loved him back.

Lambert came by the hospital the next day. He wasn't injured. 'Can you believe it?' he said. 'We're fucking heroes. They're going to give us a commendation and you're getting a Purple Heart.'

'What happened?' Eddie asked. I don't remember any Nazis.'

'Oh, there were shitloads of them, whole battalions. They had tanks, and cannons and canoes and an aircraft carrier,' Lambert joked.

'Quit fooling around. What happened? How did I wind up here?'

'Well, that story's not as interesting, and eh... I screwed up.'

'How?'

'Well, remember we were in the jeep? I heard a car racing up behind us. I turned around to look, skidded on the ice and ran off the road. It was another jeep with two MPs in it. They checked to see if we were dead or alive. You were knocked out but I was just dazed. Then those bastards unloaded my whiskey into their jeep and took off. They must have let someone know because a little while later an ambulance showed up. The medics asked me what had happened. I didn't have time to come up with a good story so I just said we'd been attacked by Nazis. They knew

I was lying but they wrote it down, put you on a stretcher into the back of their ambulance, put me in the front and took off. I was released once they checked me out, and here we are. Fucking heroes!’

Lambert had gotten Eddie into trouble before but was essentially a good guy. When Eddie told him he was going home, Lambert promised to party for both of them.

Released from hospital, Eddie was transported to Paris where he had nothing to do for a month except walk around the city while waiting for a ship home. He went to museums to look at the paintings – he especially liked the Louvre – and at night he drank himself silly, which probably didn’t help his kidneys. He thought of Thelma but the memory of her was fading. She was beautiful, she was sweet, but she was needy. He thought she might be a mistake.

‘Oh Eddie, do you love me?’ ‘Eddie, how do I look?’ ‘Am I too fat, Eddie?’ ‘Eddie, isn’t this dress too tight on me?’ ‘Eddie, tell me you love me, luv.’

Plus he was concerned about those damn pills she had from Dida, ‘Bile Beans’ to keep her skinny. She swallowed them by the handful. ‘Oh, Eddie, I’m not getting fat, am I?’

The way Dida treated her – buying her clothes, telling her what to do and when to do it – Eddie suspected that she was more than Thelma’s sister, so he’d asked Jim. ‘Well... actually... you should know but, well, anyway... Dida is Thel’s mother, but don’t tell her. You must never tell her.’ ‘Why not?’ Eddie had asked. ‘She thinks Dida hates her, the way she orders her around.’ ‘As far as Dida is concerned, she’s Thel’s sister,’ Jim had replied. ‘You won’t get her to admit anything different. She told me when Thel came to live with us six years ago, made me promise not to tell anyone, and she never mentioned it again, but I thought you should know.’

Eddie wondered if he should just break it off. He’d thought he loved her when he was in Wales, but that had been before the invasion and, frankly, after that he’d expected to die. Everyone had. But he had survived D-Day.

The night of D-Day, after they cleared the area of Nazis, he, Lambert and the other soldier dug in and slept in their small tent on a field above the Normandy cliffs. Looking down at the beach where there were so many bodies, American bodies, Eddie was surprised he was alive. He scored an egg from a farm woman and shared it with his tent mates who mixed it into their rations. They spent the next few months in France. Fighting? Unloading ships? Getting drunk? I don't know, and in November they'd been taken by train to Antwerp where every night had been like Christmas.

Eddie returned to New York to the tiny apartment on Tenth Avenue and Eighteenth Street, returned to hauling shit out of the ships that piled up waiting to be unloaded. In a few months the war would end, and like thousands of other soldiers, his father would be coming home to make his life miserable again. Eddie saved as much money as he could to buy a ticket for a ship back to Wales to marry Thelma as he had promised because it was the right thing to do, and Eddie always tried to do the right thing. Whether he loved her or not didn't matter. His father Teddy had never loved his mother but he wasn't the best example. Eddie hoped he would not become like him, a charming drunk who beat his wife.

Eddie booked passage to Southampton. From there he took a train to Bristol that stopped at every station along the way. He connected with the Great Western into Wales. Forty minutes later, he got off at Newport and trudged six blocks to Dock Street to his new home, the Windsor Castle Hotel, his new wife-to-be, Thelma Elias Samuel, and his new life, whatever that would be. Years later, not long before he died in 2005, he told me that it had been a mistake to marry Thelma. That he never should have done it. He was right.

Peter E Murphy was born in Wales and grew up in New York City where he operated heavy equipment, managed a night club and drove a cab. He is the founder of Murphy Writing of Stockton University which sponsors programmes for poets, writers and teachers in the USA and around the world. murphywriting.com