

# RECOLLECTIONS OF Carolyn Price Ryan

12 February 1973

In the fall of 1944, I was a member of the Army Nurse Corps serving with the Third General Hospital in Aix-en-Provence, Southern France. A General Hospital was set up to care for patients who required medical or surgical care over an extended period of time, therefore, we often got to know our patients very well. When they left our hospital, they were either evacuated to hospitals in the States or sent back to duty.

Audie Murphy was admitted to the officer's surgical ward with a severe shrapnel<sup>1</sup> wound of the Glutens Maximus. The last time I saw him he still had a slight limp as a result of this wound.

He looked unbelievably young. I suspect if I had to choose a candidate for the "The Great American War Hero" from that ward of officers, Murph would have been at the bottom of the list. He had the fresh boyish freckled face of a high school sophomore. I suppose the old maternal instinct took over and I showered him with attention. It became obvious to the other patients that he was "teacher's pet," and one of his fellow officers, rather amusedly, remarked, "Don't let that baby face fool you, Lieutenant, that's the toughest soldier in the Third Division!" That was the first indication I had that Murph was someone extraordinary. The respect and admiration in the Captain's voice was unmistakable.

Murph was not a difficult patient so far as one would consider a demanding patient. He was difficult to convince that he should follow doctor's orders. He would lie docilely in bed until Major Leon Ginsberg, the ward surgeon, made rounds and admonished him to stay in bed or his buttocks would never heal - then he would hop out of bed. He was obsessed with the idea that he must get back to his outfit and asked each day how long it would be before he could return to duty.

I cannot remember that Murph took part in the often ribald camaraderie among his fellow wounded officers. He was younger than most and tended to be rather reserved.

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<sup>1</sup> Audie Murphy was actually wounded by a sniper bullet. See the document entitled "Rider to Carolyn P. Ryan Statement" written by David "Spec" McClure, Oct 12, 1973.

I went on night duty - 1900 hours until 0700 hours - a very long night! Murph seemingly never slept. He would come into the nurse's office when lights were turned out in the ward and just sit there reading or chatting with the ward men while I was busy with patients or writing reports, then talking with me when I had time. I always had to chase him to bed. There he told me of his brother and sisters in the orphanage, or his older sister who had taken him from the orphanage<sup>2</sup>, his desire to be able to earn enough money to place his brother and sisters in a normal environment. We talked of many things, but never of combat. He never talked with me about war - this seemed to be a part of his life he could share with no one. I do remember one conversation very distinctly. We were discussing plans for life-after-war. I was horrified when Murph rather casually mentioned that he was considering becoming a mercenary soldier. He reasoned that he knew nothing else as well as soldiering and he was not about to go back to his previous life in Texas.

At the same time Murph was a patient in our surgical ward, another very seriously wounded officer was also a patient. He had a spinal injury and was paraplegic. This fine, courageous man was wrought with inner conflict, trying to come to terms with himself and face an absolutely different life - unfamiliar and frightening. He was another non-sleeper<sup>3</sup>. He and Murph became very close as time passed. He soon learned that he could call Murph softly enough that he wouldn't disturb the other patients and Murph would be at his bedside at once. Murph would help if he could or summon me if necessary. He was always considerate, patient, sympathetic and gently helpful. I understand he and Lt. Perry Pitt remained life long friends.

From our hospital, Murph was sent to a convalescent camp several miles from Aix-en-Provence. There our former patients were conditioned mentally and physically for the transition from patient to combat soldier. Whenever possible, Murph would get transportation into Aix, pick me up after duty, walk home with me, have dinner at our officer's mess, then return to camp. One afternoon I was off duty, so we went to a small bistro for a glass of wine. We were sitting in a corner booth, while at the bar there were several soldiers drinking. Slowly but surely we became aware that their attention was directed toward us. Remarks about any-babyfaced-

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<sup>2</sup> Audie Murphy was never actually in an orphanage although his younger siblings were. See the document entitled "Rider to Carolyn P. Ryan Statement" written by David "Spec" McClure, Oct 12, 1973.

<sup>3</sup> See the document entitled "Rider to Carolyn P. Ryan Statement" written by David "Spec" McClure, Oct 12, 1973, for more details on Audie Murphy's insomnia now recognized to be Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

ninety-day-wonder-with-a-bar-on-his-shoulder could get a date with a nurse, etc. began intruding into our conversation. Murph's face became grim and white, his eyes grew cold and narrow, and I became frightened. On consideration for my plea that we pay and get out saved us from an ugly brawl. That was one time he managed to conquer his famous Irish temper.

He was returned to duty from the convalescent camp. When suddenly the Army realized they had a real life hero, a giant among brave fighting men, they jerked him out of combat and sent him to the Riviera so nothing could happen to him before they had a chance to show him off<sup>4</sup>.

Murph called from Cannes asking if I could get a few days of leave and join him there. I explained it was impossible. He sounded lonely, bored and unhappy, so I wasn't surprised a few days later to return to my ward in the afternoon to learn from my ward master that a young officer, with a chest full of medals, had been there asking for me. The patients too were very curious about him - that array of ribbons was very impressive.

Murph's valor and fame was beginning to spread among the armed forces. We had dinner at our officer's mess and several of the doctors came by to congratulate him. He seemed rather embarrassed about all this ado and yet rather pleased at the recognition awarded him by our medical staff.

After Murph returned to the States and was the subject for the cover feature of Life Magazine, I met Major Leon Ginsberg in our mess hall. He stopped me and remarked, "Well Pricie, I see our boy made Life. I healed him and you held his hand and neither one of us got our name in Life!"

In September 1945, our hospital returned to the United States after twenty-eight months overseas. I could hardly wait to get to a phone, anticipating surprising my father and family. I had deliberately not notified them that we were returning home. I soon learned that there was a card there from Audie Murphy asking me to contact him when I arrived in Kentucky. My family was just sitting around waiting for my call. Murph had very effectively spoiled my surprise.

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<sup>4</sup>Audie only spent a few days at the Riviera and wasn't comfortable being there with other soldiers finishing the fight. See the document entitled "Rider to Carolyn P. Ryan Statement" written by David "Spec" McClure, Oct 12, 1973.

After forty-five days leave, I was sent to San Antonio, Texas for processing and reassignment. Murph flew in from California, enroute to spend Thanksgiving with friends somewhere in Texas. I can still remember how startled I was to see him in civilian clothes. He seemed a bit ill at ease as a civilian - perhaps because I was still in uniform and he hadn't been out of it long enough.

There was still a lot of the modest, unsophisticated, Texas farm boy there. He hadn't quite come to terms with the fame and honor that had been heaped upon him. I remember he called the airport to make reservations and was told that the flight was booked solid. After mentioning his name, he seemed almost unbelieving when told, "Of course, a seat will be made available, Mr. Murphy."

I was naturally curious to note any changes that fame had wrought in the young man of whom I was very fond. I could detect no vanity, no sign of overbearing arrogance. He was still the humorous, charming, unpretentious, rather tense, extremely likable Murph of pre-fame days. I felt he was adjusting to public adoration with quiet dignity, and at that time, a degree of astonishment.

We discussed his decision to sign a movie contract with James Cagney, I believe, rather than accept a regular army commission that had been offered him. I was concerned about the effect of the artificial, fickle world of moviedom on the sensitive young man who had experienced so much in the horror that is war. His reason was simply, "I need the money." He was again thinking of his parentless younger brother and sisters.

I returned to the routine of Army Nurse life at Fort Knox, Kentucky. I had visions of Murph's exciting, glamorous life as a celebrity, surrounded by his adoring public - mostly female. I was more than a little surprised when he called at midnight one night and asked me to take leave at the end of my tour of night duty and come to California. He was desperately lonely and depressed. It was all too obvious that he was unhappy and dissatisfied with his life. He needed a friend! Unfortunately, I could not take leave at that time. I was still in service.

We lived in different worlds and eventually completely lost contact. I, of course, followed with interest the high points of his life through the news media. I was deeply moved and saddened at the news of his tragic death. I remembered the soft spoken, unassuming, brave young soldier who was my friend, Audie Murphy.