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Last combat hero is long forgotten

by Bob Greene

Most American workers still retire at the age of 65, and this is the year that many Americans who were born in 1924 will be taking their retirement. One of them - had he lived - would have been Audie Murphy.

Audie Murphy was the most decorated soldier in our nation's history. There have really been only two wars that produced individual heroes on the level of Audie Murphy. The hero of World War I was Sgt. Alvin York. The hero of World War II was Audie Murphy. The most-decorated soldiers of Korea and Vietnam were not widely honored by their countrymen and did not become national celebrities.

I have long been fascinated by the life of Audie Murphy. Recently I read two books: the 1949 autobiography that was largely ghostwritten for Murphy, "To Hell and Back" and galley proofs of a remarkable new biography that will be published this summer, "No Name on the Bullet," by Don Graham. The story of Audie Murphy's life is at the same time awesome and terrifying and almost unbearably sad.

Born in poverty in rural Texas, Murphy received only a fifth-grade education. His father abandoned Audie's ailing mother and Audie's brothers and sisters. "I can't remember ever being young in my life," Audie would recall later. Of his father, he would say: "I suppose I hated him because I hate anyone who quits." Audie Murphy was tiny; when he went to enlist in the Army, he was 5-feet 5-1/2 inches tall and weighed 112 pounds. His face was that of a child.

He went overseas at the age of 18. By the end of the war it was said that he had killed 241 enemy soldiers. He was awarded the Medal of Honor and 36 other medals; no soldier in American history had matched that record. He returned home, 20 years old, the symbol of what the country wanted its veterans to be. He appeared to be totally unmarked and unaffected by the war. Inside he was churning and tormented. But he still had that baby face. It was perfect for the cover of Life Magazine, and that's where it ended up. He

was described as "a swell kid, absolutely modest and sincere and genuine and unaltered by terrible experiences." He knew that wasn't true. Later he would say of coming home: "Things don't thrill you anymore. It's a struggle every day to find something interesting to do."

Today, it is hard to imagine the level of adulation heaped upon Audie Murphy. The mere sight of him brought tears to people's eyes. He married, and his wife said, "Audie had the most beautiful smile, but unfortunately he never smiled much." He slept with a pistol under his pillow and tormented his bride.

He sought a career in Hollywood. His fame was all he had to sell; his education amounted to nothing, and he could not go out in public or register at a hotel without people gaping so he figured he might as well make a living from his name. He began appearing in cowboy films. One day, while on a film-promotion trip that took him to Dallas, his dad showed up in the lobby of the Adolphus Hotel. The message was relayed to Audie in his room. "I don't have a father," Audie said, and his dad was not allowed up.

He was divorced and married again. The cowboy movies did all right, but his timing was terrible; television had become America's major medium of entertainment and cowboy films were considered passé. Well into the '60's, though, he made them; you can still see some of them on post-midnight TV: "Hell Bent for Leather," "Bullet for a Badman," "Gunpoint"

America's most decorated soldier wrote some songs; he got hooked on prescription drugs, gambled relentlessly and accepted acting jobs in cheap productions filmed overseas for foreign consumption. He found himself begging unsavory bookmakers to pay him his winnings. He died in the crash of a small plane on Memorial Day weekend, 1971. His death rated 20 seconds on each of the network evening newscasts.

He was the last U.S. combat hero, at least the last to be idolized by his countrymen. Some of us grew up with his very name causing us to become wide-eyed. Had he lived a normal life, he would be retiring this year. As it is, according to biographer Don Graham, today few young Americans have heard of Audie Murphy. Pressed, they think that perhaps he is Eddie Murphy's brother.