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Audie Murphy tale still touches nerve

By Bob Greene

You can't predict what will touch a nerve.

A few weeks ago I devoted a column to Audie Murphy, the most-decorated soldier of World War II. Murphy, who died in the crash of a small plane in 1971, just may have been the greatest combat hero in American history; he killed 240 enemy soldiers and was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor, along with 36 other medals. In the late '40's Murphy was the object of the kind of adulation and adoration reserved for rock singers and movie stars today.

But the country was entering an era in which combat soldiers would not be regarded as heroes. Murphy moved to California, he became an actor in cowboy movies, he got hooked on prescription drugs and became a compulsive gambler. I wrote the column because his story, to me, is one of the most complex and fascinating of our times. Frankly, I didn't think the column would interest too many people.

I was wrong. Those of you who remember Murphy were touched; those of you who had never heard of him were intrigued. Today, reactions from two readers with very different perspectives:

"Audie Murphy was our neighbor in the late '40's," said Jane Carter, 72. Mrs. Carter and her husband, Gordon, now 87, were living in California at the time. Audie Murphy, according to Mrs. Carter, had an apartment in the same small complex.

"He was still helping out his brothers and sisters back in Texas," Mrs. Carter said. Murphy, the supreme war hero of his time, had emerged from a life of poverty and desperation in rural Texas; his mother had been ill most of her life, his father had deserted the family and Audie had been in charge of his brothers and sisters.

"Audie had a very sweet nature, and he was determined to succeed in Hollywood so he could keep sending money home," Mrs. Carter said. "One weekend I found a recipe in the Ladies' Home Journal - it was about how to 'extend' ham to get more savings out of the meat. So I took the meat and I pounded, chopped, seasoned and molded it - I wound up with several meat-loaf looking things, and took them over to Audie and a friend of his.

"The next morning their was a soft tap at our door. It was Audie, with the meat. He said, 'Jane, we love your cooking - but I can't eat this. Do you realize that you've just made Spam?'" Spam was the canned meat that the soldiers ate overseas, and a lot of them couldn't stand the taste of it once they got home. Audie thought that what I'd made was basically homemade Spam.

"He would often baby-sit with our son, Garrett. If we were going out, we would ask Audie to come over. Even though Garrett was only 4 years old, they got along wonderfully. I don't know if it was because Garrett was a 4-year old who liked to play war hero or because Audie was a war hero who liked to act like a 4-year old."

"But when we moved to Illinois later, Garrett's class in school was assigned to write essays about 'My Favorite Baby-sitter.'

We got a call from the school. They were worried - they said that Garrett's essay

was very good, but they were concerned that he was indulging in some vivid, unexplainable fantasy. The school people said, 'Your son says that his favorite babysitter was Audie Murphy. He goes into some detail.' We finally persuaded them that it was true."

Thomas B. Morgan, now 62, is a journalist who in 1967 was assigned by a national magazine to do a profile of Audie Murphy.

"I think the assignment was based on the fact that there had been stories that he was going to make some terrible movie in North Africa or something," Morgan said. "It was an ironic thing - 'Hey, here's Audie Murphy, and he's going to act in some third-rate Western so bad that they're shooting it in North Africa to save money.' The story was supposed to be kind of a 'What ever happened to Audie Murphy?' piece"

Morgan flew to California and spent much of a week with Murphy. Yes, Murphy was in bad shape; yes, Murphy's life had fallen apart. Thomas Morgan talked with Murphy for all those hours, and listened to him, and watched him. At the end of the week Murphy said, "Well, thanks for being so nice."

Morgan went back to New York - and could not write the story. He simply would not let himself do it.

"I could not forget that this guy had done a wonderful thing," Morgan said. "He *was* a great soldier who, in the very real sense, gave his life for our country in one of the few just wars ever fought on this planet. What would have been gained by me writing an article saying that now he was wasted?"

"When people think of Audie Murphy, they should consider that none of

the sad things that happened to him after he won the Congressional Medal of Honor should be ignored - but neither should those things prevent Americans from appreciating his personal triumphs over the most formidable obstacles. In a way, Audie Murphy was a casualty of war - but he was a great hero, and when we remember him, we should remember that first."