

WAR HERO IS REMEMBERED

*By Cathryn McCue
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THREE YEARS AND A DAY after Audie Murphy died, the government issued a permit to the VFW post for a monument on Brush Mountain honoring the military hero.

WEBBS MILL - The rock stands out with distinction among its peers on top of Brush Mountain. It's square, for one thing, and curiously free of weeds and lichen.

An inscription is chiseled into the perfectly smooth top:

Audie Leon Murphy
June 20, 1924
May 28, 1971

Then there's the bright red, white and blue wreath propped up in front, placed there by the Christiansburg post of the Veterans of Foreign Wars.

"You would not believe what we had to do to set this here and walk away in quiet," Clarence Viers told the group of 50 people gathered Friday on the high Appalachian ridge that separates Craig County from Roanoke County.

They had come on Veterans Day to remember and honor Murphy, the most decorated soldier in World War II, who died 23 years ago when the twin-engine plane in which he was a passenger crashed into the mountain.

The piece of rock has almost as much history as the man it memorializes.

Viers, post commander at the time, said VFW members began working to erect a monument to the military hero the month after the accident.

"We wore out two or three congressmen trying to get that monument," he recalled. "Just government red tape."

The plane crashed on U.S. Forest Service land, and the federal government had at first talked about building a road to handle 100 cars a day, with toilets and water lines.

"Our intention was to put it here and just leave it, just to be part of the mountain," Viers said. Three years and a day after Murphy died, the government finally issued a permit to the VFW post. On Veterans Day that year, 1974, about 150 people made the trek to see the unveiling.

For several years afterward, nobody could get to it because a nearby landowner refused to let the public cross his land. So the Forest Service bought some other land and right-of-way access, and realigned the Appalachian Trail to swing by the monument.

Since then, the veterans have come up a couple of times a year to clear brush and maintain the area.

Except for a rifle shot that took out one of the words early on, the block of granite has not been vandalized or disturbed.

This year's celebration, the 20th anniversary of the rock, was a cooperative effort between the VFW post and the Forest Service.

In midafternoon, under sunny skies, in the stillness and quiet of a mountain ridge 3,100 feet high, Audie was honored by people he never met. Viers read a short speech about "the supreme sacrifice," gave thanks for the freedoms and privileges of living in America, and said a prayer.

The color guard of the Virginia Tech Corps of Cadets dipped the American flag and other flags halfway to the ground, and three buglers played taps, the mournful notes hanging in the chilly air. Men removed their baseball caps, veterans saluted, and women stood, recalling a man who stood with distinction among his peers.

The son of a Texas sharecropper, Murphy joined the infantry at 18. During three years of service, he earned three Purple Hearts and the Medal of Honor for a long, lone battle in which he stood atop a burning tank loaded with explosives and held off an advancing company of German soldiers with a .50-caliber machine gun.

He received 21 other U.S. medals, three from France and one from Belgium.

Back in the states, Murphy's good looks and heroism grabbed the attention of Hollywood producers. Over the years, he acted in 40 movies, mostly Westerns.

"I made the same Western about 30 times. With different horses," he once said in the Texas drawl he never lost.

He also starred as himself in TO HELL

AND BACK, based on his autobiography.

"It was his best, I think," said Virginia Graham of Fairlawn. She and her son were one of the first to arrive at the monument Friday. She sat on rocks until the VFW members arrived with folding chairs.

Graham remembers being shocked on hearing the news of the soldier-turned-actor's tragic death. She still has the clipping from the Roanoke times.

Murphy, 46, and four business associates were flying from Atlanta to Martinsville that spring day to visit a manufacturing plant in which he was interested in investing. The last contact from the plane was a call to the Roanoke control tower inquiring about weather conditions.

Several people in Grayson and Carrol counties said they heard and saw a plane in trouble in the rain and fog that morning. "The plane was flying like it was on a yo-yo string," one Galax reporter noted...

... After that, people came up to the mountain and took the wreckage away piece by piece as souvenirs. Many of the pieces are now at the VFW post in Christiansburg.

Mason Cole, a veteran of WWII, and his wife, Velma, missed the main celebration but were glad to be there anyway. They had intended for years to come see the monument, and the mountain that took Murphy's life. Velma Cole gazed out through the leafless trees to the ridges on either side of her.

"When he died, he sure did close to heaven," she said.