

AUDIE MURPHY EPITOME OF 'WAR HERO'

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It has been some 25 Memorial Day weekends, a quarter of a century, since America lost its favorite war hero. When the word came the afternoon of June 1, 1971, that Audie Murphy had been found dead in the wreckage of an aircraft the day before, it was like losing a family member. To soldiers in the 3rd Infantry Division, headquartered in Wurzburg, Germany, he symbolized what the word "hero" is all about.

It would have been difficult to find a company in the division that didn't have a copy of his portrait on display, and the original painting was displayed prominently between two other Medal of Honor recipients in the division museum.

Many would have been hard pressed to name the other two soldiers, but just about everyone in the division knew that Audie Murphy was the most-decorated soldier of World War II. Although some who knew him personally would call him Audie, Murph or Little Texas in face-to-face conversation (or "Baby" by the brave or foolhardy), the full name, Audie Murphy, was what they always used when referring to him in the third person.

About 6:30 a.m. that day, I, as the Division Support Command public-information specialist, had been told to coordinate with the division photo unit and collect all negatives and original photos of Murphy and package them for shipment to Department of the Army. No reason was given, and the museum portrait was among the items collected.

The U.S. flag flying at half staff on the division flagpole should have provided a clue as to the reason, but the reason pictures were being collected didn't come until about five hours later.

Murphy had been introduced to me, like he was to many of my generation, through the magic of the movie screen in the movie "Bad Boy." He portrayed a juvenile delinquent sent to a boys' ranch. At the ranch, the boy was constantly in trouble until near the end of the film, when he accidentally caused the death of his favorite horse.

After seeing the film twice -- at Saturday matinees -- I left with the impression that I had watched a pretty good child actor. He appeared about 15 years old.

"Bad Boy" set the pattern for Murphy movies. He might be a bad guy or coward at the start, but never at the end. I saw them all -- mostly westerns -- throughout my teenage years.

As a 17-year-old basic trainee in 1955, I heard a lot of Murphy's name. A trainee who stood a little too high to toss a hand grenade would be chastised with, "Whatta you think you are, Audie Murphy?" The question would come to anyone who happened to fire a blank-loaded rifle from the hip, hand hold a machine gun or suggest a too-bold maneuver during a training exercise.

To me they were comparing the offender to that "kid" movie star, who had

probably reached 20 years old by then.

After I reached Fort Sam Houston, Texas, where I would be stationed the next four years, I went to see "To Hell and Back" -- Murphy's life story.

Movie credits told me not only that Murphy was not a kid actor, he was a genuine World War II hero and Medal of Honor recipient. Easily able to pass for 18, he was nearly 31 years old.

A little research told me that he had earned the Medal of Honor, and nearly every other Army decoration for valor, before his 21st birthday.

The recommendation for his Medal of Honor credited Murphy with holding off two reinforced rifle companies single-handedly for hours. Near Holtzwihr, Germany, Murphy's platoon was attacked by an infantry force spearheaded by six tanks. Two U.S. tank destroyers took up the defense but found their shells unable to penetrate the oncoming behemoths. One destroyer was quickly knocked out and left smoldering by the German cannons, and the other slipped into a drainage ditch as it tried to seek cover.

Murphy ordered his men to pull back and boarded the burning tank destroyer and opened fire on the infantry with the .50-caliber machine gun while he called for artillery support. The tanks, giving Murphy's tank destroyer a wide berth for fear it would explode, took the lone soldier under fire as they drove past. Murphy continued concentrating on the infantry as he called in artillery on a field phone. An artillery lieutenant, fearing that Murphy was calling in the artillery too close, asked how far away

the enemy troops were, and Murphy replied, "Just hold the phone and I'll let you talk to one of the bastards!"

As the German soldiers crawled to within 10 feet of the burning tank destroyer, Murphy called the artillery in virtually on his position -- then the phone went dead. His "body count" thus far was about 35, and enemy soldiers were at his rear. His luck was holding, however, as U.S. fighters appeared at the scene to turn the battle just as his death or capture seemed imminent. He finally abandoned the tank destroyer and attempted to make it to the rear as the enemy force began its retreat toward Holtzwihr. Wounded in one leg (his fourth wound) and "too exhausted and scared" to care if he was shot by the retreating Germans, Murphy limped toward his own lines as the tank destroyer he had just vacated exploded. Although wounded, Murphy refused to be evacuated and led his men in a counter-attack.

After I learned about that, I made it a point to see every one of Murphy's movies that came to the post theaters wherever I happened to be stationed. Although I never met the man, to me Audie Murphy is the epitome of what the overused-word "hero" is all about -- an ordinary person who, at considerable risk to himself, took extraordinary action to defend someone else ... although no one would have been critical of him had he not committed the acts.