

MEMBERSHIP IN SERGEANT AUDIE MURPHY CLUB: ONE OF ARMY'S HIGHEST NCO PEACETIME HONORS

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(Fort Hood Sentinel) Editor's Note: This is the final part to a four part series that began Jan. 16 (1997) about Audie Murphy and the Sergeant Audie Murphy Club.

There are medals, certificates and other official recognitions that soldiers can receive for outstanding duty, but for the Army Noncommissioned Officer, being selected for membership in the Sergeant Audie Murphy Club is the highest of peacetime honors.

"Audie Murphy has no peer as the supreme example of American War Hero by which all generations of American War Hero may measure themselves when confronted by perilous circumstances," said U.S. Congressman Olin E. "Tiger" Teague before his death in 1981.

"Audie Murphy epitomizes the gutsy citizen soldier who, since 1775, has answered the call to defend freedom. If ever an American soldier signified the totality of the American fighting man, Audie did," Teague said of his friend and fellow Texan.

"It was Teague who introduced legislation that resulted in the San Antonio Veteran's Affairs hospital being named as the Audie Murphy Memorial Veterans Hospital. It was at Fort Hood that the memory of Audie Murphy's love of country, ideals and leadership traits was perpetuated with the founding of a

special club of today's distinguished NCOs.

Membership in this coveted and exclusive club is based on the truest of U.S. Army ideals and American NCO leadership styles of Sgt. Audie Murphy who earned each of his promotions on the hard fought battlefields of World War II.

"To be trusted with carrying the prestige and honor of this country's most decorated soldier is just awesome," emphasized III Corps and Ft. Hood Command Sgt Maj. Benjamin C. Palacios, advisor to the club.

"The Sergeant Audie Murphy Club is designed to recognize those noncommissioned officers who exemplify Audie Murphy's characteristics and set the standard for leadership, excellence and NCO professionalism" Palacios explained.

Former III Corps, and later Command Sgt. Maj. of Forces Command, Richard B. Cayton said members of the Sergeant Audie Murphy Club are NCOs who do more than just read the Creed of the NCO - "they live and breathe the words all day, every day."

"It (the club) was established to provide a fraternity for outstanding NCOs in the Army who live the creed," Cayton emphasized.

The original Sgt. Audie Murphy Club has its roots in Fort Hood early in 1986. There were several key people at Fort Hood - officer, enlisted, civil service and a Killeen civilian - who were instrumental in getting the club up and running.

Leading the effort was Lt. Gen. Crosbie Saint, then the III Corps commander; his Command Sgt. Maj. George L. Horvath; III Corps Awards Clerk Jean Crisp, who is now the Test and Experimentation Command awards clerk and Don Moore, a Killeen artist who assisted with designing the logo and the club awards.

"The great NCO leaders inducted into the club are sergeants who, like Audie Murphy, are proud to live by a creed that guides them on the path of caring," Cayton said. "Such an individual is known universally as a soldier's soldier - a leader who lives the responsibility - not one who wears an ego."

In 1991, then III Corps Commander Lt. Gen. Pete Taylor and Cayton expanded the Fort Hood installation club to include all of III Corps. This included Fort Riley, Kan.; Fort Sill, Okla.; Fort Bliss, Texas; Fort Polk, La. and Fort Carson, Colo.

Following Operation Desert Storm in 1991, the Fort Hood club was dedicated in the memory of Sgt. 1st Class Harold P. Witzke III, who was killed in action as a member of 3rd Battalion, 67th Armor Regiment, 2nd Armored Division.

Witzke was inducted into the Sergeant Audie Murphy Club Jan. 29, 1990 at Fort Hood. On Feb. 26, 1991, during the battle to liberate Kuwait, Witzke, an M-1 Abrams tank, was killed by automatic weapons fire while assaulting an enemy

bunker.

"With utter disregard for his own personal safety, he (Witzke) courageously engaged several Iraqi snipers who were firing on the battalion tactical operations center. Armed with a light machinegun, Witzke suppressed the enemy fire and directed other members of the operations center in returning effective fire," states the citation for the Silver Star.

Audie Murphy had the reputation of not asking his soldiers to do anything he wasn't willing to do. He always put his soldiers first and always led by example.

On the brutal testing ground of courage and sacrifice, Witzke was obviously emulating Murphy when, as the enemy fire became more effective "and threatened the soldiers and security of the operations center, he moved under heavy enemy fire to a more advantageous machine gun position where he was mortally wounded," the station stated.

In 1993, Cayton was voted into the Sergeant Audie Murphy Club by the membership and then became the FORSCOM Command Sgt. Maj. Soon thereafter, the club became FORSCOM-wide, including the Reserves and National Guard.

In 1994 at a Sgt. Maj. of the Army conference, the Sergeant Audie Murphy Club spread Army-wide, to all commands with installations retaining the selection process for their own NCOs.

"The program is a success because it is an extension of the commander's desire for recognition of excellence within the

NCO Corps," Cayton emphasized.

Last week, some 36 new members were added to the distinguished rolls of the Sergeant Audie Murphy Club at Fort Hood in special ceremonies at the Phantom Warrior Club.

True to the spirit of Audie Murphy and the way his troops thought about him, soldiers each introduced their new inductee as "my Sergeant Audie Murphy."