

WWII HERO IS WINNING NEW GLORY

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Bill Weinberg remembers his old war buddy Audie Murphy.

Weinberg, who grew up in Gloucester County, N.J., fought with Murphy in France in World War II and vividly recalls the skinny, teenage Texan's courage in battle.

"The thing that impressed me the most was his strong sense of responsibility for his men," Weinberg said.

Yesterday, in northeast Texas, people who live near his old hometown recalled Murphy, too, marking a time of renewed interest across the country in the Medal of Honor winner with an untarnished past.

Local leaders said interest in Murphy had grown so much in the last couple of years that Greenville decided to expand the size and scope of its tribute to him.

The Audie L. Murphy Hunt County Memorial Exhibit was dedicated in Greenville, Texas. The ceremony was part of the community's celebration of Audie Murphy Day, so designated by the Texas Legislature. The exhibit, in the American Cotton Museum, had been moved from the local library.

Murphy won the Medal of Honor, America's highest citation for heroism, for his actions on Jan. 26, 1945. After ordering his men to safety, he stood atop a burning tank destroyer and single-handedly held off six German tanks and

250 Nazi infantrymen in the Colmar Pocket.

But Weinberg said he remembered best an incident the day before, Jan. 25, when B Company, 15th Infantry Regiment, Third Infantry Division was attacking across an open field, heading toward a woodland. A German machine gun opened up, forcing the men to the ground.

"Murph walked up and asked what was happening. We told him. He just said 'Cover me,' and he trotted up to the bunker where the machine gun was shooting as he went, and killed all the Germans there. I don't know how he did it," Weinberg said.

"I think he was just someone willing to stick his neck out. But it was a matter of being careful, too. He took more risks than others, but he did it in a calculated way," said Weinberg, now 76, a retired university administrator living near New Brunswick.

The U.S. Army also remembers Murphy, the most decorated combat soldier of World War II. In 1987, the Army established the Sgt. Audie Murphy Club to honor noncommissioned officers who have excelled at leadership. There are about 3,000 members in about 20 chapters at Army bases worldwide. Sgt. Maj. Jerry Alley, the top enlisted man of the Army Forces Command at Fort McPherson, Ga., said: "The Army will not forget him as long as this

organization lives. He gave us our motto: You lead from the front."

No one can know for sure what made men like Murphy do incredible things on the battlefields, but there are clues.

Murphy's son said his father frequently talked of being beaten up at school because he was a runt.

"Because of that, he had an affinity for anyone beat down, and he became protective of people all of his life, and of his men when he was in the Army," said Terry Murphy in a telephone interview.

"He told me he preferred to do things by himself [in the war] rather than let some new men do it, because he knew he could do it and that they probably would get killed," Terry Murphy said.

Murphy, 45, said he thought his father's actions stemmed from his boyhood when Audie Murphy took responsibility for his eight brothers and sisters, as well as his mother, who was in poor health after his father abandoned the family.

Audie Murphy dropped out of school in the fifth grade and went to work full time for a farmer to help support the family, which at one point lived in a railroad car near Kingston, Texas, said Terry Murphy, a screenwriter and magazine editor.

Audie's sister, Nadene, 66, said he hunted for rabbits for supper with an old .22-caliber rifle and one or two bullets. She said he became a crack shot and hunter, qualities that served him well in battle.

Larryann Willis, executive director of the recently formed Audie Murphy Research Foundation in California, said Murphy was raised with guns, played with them, and was used to being shot at in games children played then, making him more at ease under fire.

"As kids he and his friends would put bottles on their heads and shoot at them, and they would shoot books out of each other's hands," Willis said.

After Murphy's mother died in 1941, the younger children were placed in an orphanage, and he decided to join the war.

The Marines laughed him out of their office because he was so small, and the Navy also turned him down. The Army took him on June 30, 1942. He was 5-foot-5 and 112 pounds.

He passed out during training at Camp Wolters, Texas, and the Army tried to make him a cook. He resisted, saying he wanted to fight.

Just before he went overseas, the Army again tried to spare him the rigors of combat by offering him a post-exchange clerk's job.

This baby-faced teen fought in nine major campaigns, was wounded three times, and instinctively took a leadership role when the fighting was fiercest. He rose from private to sergeant, and then gained a battlefield commission as a second lieutenant and eventually became commanding officer of B Company while still in his teens.

Murphy, a dirt-poor, undersize youngster from the cotton fields of northeast Texas,

became the best-known soldier of the war. During two years of fighting through Sicily, Italy, France and Germany, he won every medal for valor the Army could offer and five decorations from France and Belgium.

By war's end, he had killed more than 240 enemy soldiers. He was believed to be only 19 years old. He had fibbed about his age and joined the Army at 17 - or perhaps 16. His age is still in dispute.

His picture on the cover of Life Magazine in July 1945 led to an invitation to Hollywood by actor James Cagney, who took Murphy in. He became a movie star, poet, author and songwriter, despite suffering intensely from post-traumatic stress all his adult life.

He was killed in a private airplane crash on Memorial Day weekend, May 28, 1971, near Roanoke, Va.

Since then, memory of his life has faded like an old photo, largely because his generation is dying.

But many who believe the United States should remember its heroes are working hard to keep his legend alive, including:

- A three-year-old fan club with more than 300 members, some from overseas, including Germany, headed by Stan Smith of Potomac, Md. "Many young people today think he's Eddie Murphy's brother, and they don't even know what the Medal of Honor is," Smith said.

- The nonprofit Audie Murphy Research Foundation, formed about two years ago in Santa Clarita, Calif., by his oldest son, Terry Michael Murphy. Its aim is to find and interview men who served with Murphy during the war, and to preserve his history. The foundation's first goal is to produce a CD-ROM for school and college libraries.
- An 18-month old Web site, <http://www.audiemurphy.com>, that offers instant accessibility to Murphy data.
- A nationwide campaign, started two years ago, that has collected more than 24,000 signatures on petitions seeking to have the U.S. Postal Service issue a stamp honoring him.

Murphy fans credit the Arts and Entertainment cable television network for sparking the revived interest with an A&E biography of him on July 1, 1996. A&E has rerun the biography twice and says it is one of its most popular.

In addition, a New York company, MJF Books, last year reissued Murphy's autobiography, *To Hell and Back*, a 1949 best-seller, and it is now in a second printing.

Blackstone Audiobooks of Ashland, Ore., released an audio version of *To Hell and Back* a few months ago, said owner Craig Black, 46.

"I rented the film version about six months ago for my son and sat down and watched it with him, and became fascinated by the whole story and decided it was worthy of being put on tape," Black said.

The American Movie Classics cable channel continues to show his movies, mostly westerns, and twice each year the 1955 film made from *To Hell and Back*, starring Audie Murphy as Audie Murphy.

Terry Murphy said his father was embarrassed to be called a hero, and that he often gave away and threw away his many medals.

"He always said the real heroes were the guys who didn't come back," he said.

Murphy's grave at Arlington Cemetery is one of the most visited plots, along with those of President John F. Kennedy and the Tomb of the Unknowns. His final resting place is marked by a simple white government-issue tombstone.