

TROOPS FROM FORT SILL VISIT MURPHY STATUE, MUSEUM

By Brad Kellar/Herald-Banner Staff

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A larger-than-life statue of a larger-than-life hero recently played host to a group of soldiers who dream of someday being part of an elite group honoring Audie Murphy.

About 150 troops from the U.S. Army base at Fort Sill, Okla., many of whom had recently returned from service in Operation Iraqi Freedom, arrived at the Audie Murphy/American Cotton Museum Thursday afternoon for a visit to the facility which is in part dedicated to the memory of the Hunt County native who became the most decorated American soldier of World War II and a successful movie actor. As the men and women spilled out of three tour buses in the museum's parking lot, they were greeted by Adrien Witkofsky, the museum's director; Dr. Graham Sweeney, the president of the museum's board and Gordon Thomas, who sculpted the statue of Murphy's likeness which rests on the museum grounds.

"We are glad to have you visit with us and we hope that you make plans to come visit with us again," Witkofsky said. "Bring your friends and your family and we will show them that we are a friendly, friendly town."

The front of the museum was adorned with "Welcome Back" and "Thank You" wishes from students in the Boles

Independent School District, where Sweeney serves as superintendent.

The museum officials were in turn serenaded by the several of the troops, who sang "Dog Faced Soldier", the Third Infantry Division theme song.

Thomas guided the assembly to the base of the statue, where he provided the story behind its creation and how it came to find its home at the museum. Thomas also explained how efforts are underway to create a memorial at the site which will be dedicated to all Hunt County veterans who lost their lives in wartime.

Listening in was 1st Sgt. Mark Aaron, who is helping establish a 75th Brigade branch of the "Sgt. Audie Murphy Club" at Fort Sill, a group which uses Murphy as a pattern for their own Army careers. "Were trying to get a lot of members who believe in the things that Audie Murphy achieved and that is something we are trying to instill in the Army, our warrior ethos, today," Aaron said. Aaron was making his first visit to the museum, although he has been a member of the Sgt. Audie Murphy Club at the post since 1998.

"It's an honor for me to come out here today," Aaron said. Those chosen for the club need to know their stuff, Aaron said, including everything to do with

Murphy's life. "It is a tough cut to be inducted into the Audie Murphy Club," Aaron said. "The way we have it set up at Fort Sill, you have to have a lot of soldier knowledge of Audie Murphy and the town and his history and his biography and the things that he achieved."

Aaron himself returned in November from a tour of duty in Iraq. "It's great to be back," he added.

The soldiers were also given guided tours of the museum, including artifacts relating to Murphy's life, military service and movie career, as well as the museum's exhibits on other Hunt County heroes such as Maj. Gen. Claire Chennault, Reecy Davis and Monty Stratton and the importance of cotton to the county's history.

Aaron said Fort Sill annually sends a contingent to take part in the Audie Murphy Days celebration at the museum, which this year is scheduled for June 18-19.