

Behind the Names

Part 3

VA facilities all over the country bear the names of Americans who made significant contributions to their country. Who were they? In this feature series, we take a look at the historical figures for whom some of VA's facilities are named.

VA facilities all over the country bear the names of great Americans. Who were they? In this third installment of our feature series, we look at the historical figures behind the names of two VA medical centers.

Two American heroes, both Medal of Honor recipients, earned the honor and respect of their countrymen, and VA honored them by naming medical centers in their memories.



Audie L. Murphy

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The Audie L. Murphy Veterans Hospital in San Antonio, Texas, honors the most decorated U.S. combat soldier of World War II. He earned every decoration for valor this country could offer, as well as similar honors from Belgium and France. His life began in a family of poor Texas sharecroppers, and after the war, his achievements and contributions touched millions.

In January 1945, near Holtzwihr, France, 2nd Lt. Murphy's company was attacked by six tanks and waves of infantry. He ordered his men to withdraw to protective woods, but remained at his forward post ordering close-in artillery

strikes to support the withdrawal, a move that devastated the advancing Germans.

A U.S. tank nearby had taken a hit and was burning, threatening to explode. With the enemy closing around him, Murphy climbed onto the burning vehicle and used its machine gun to kill dozens of Germans, ultimately stopping their advance. The Germans tried to eliminate Murphy, only to be destroyed as they approached his position. He was wounded, but continued to fight until he exhausted his ammunition. He withdrew to his squad and organized a counterattack, causing a full withdrawal of the Germans. These actions earned him the Medal of Honor.

Murphy spent three years in active military service. He entered as a private, rose to the rank of staff sergeant, and was given a "battlefield" commission of second

lieutenant. He was wounded three times and survived nine major campaigns in Europe.

He was released from active service in September 1945. Actor James Cagney invited him to Hollywood to try his hand at acting, but the succeeding years were tough, with the movie industry offering only small parts.

Then in 1949, Murphy played himself in the Hollywood release of his autobiography "To Hell and Back." The film was a big hit, holding the box office record until the 1975 release of "Jaws." Murphy's place in Hollywood was assured and he went on to star in 26 films, mostly westerns, over the next 15 years. In 25 years of acting, he made a total of 44 films.

Murphy owned ranches throughout the Southwest, where he bred and raced horses. He was a prodigious gambler, betting on horses, sporting events and cards. It's reported that he won and lost fortunes.

He is also known as a successful poet and songwriter. His compositions have been recorded by Dean Martin, Eddy Arnold, Charley Pride, Jimmy Bryant, Porter Wagoner, Jerry Wallace, Roy Clark, Harry Nilsson and many others.

Murphy suffered bouts of depression, insomnia and substance abuse as a result of his war experiences. Recognizing his addiction to prescribed sleeping pills, he broke the habit by locking himself in a motel room for a week.

Audie Murphy suffered from what is today known as PTSD. Until the 1960s, "battle fatigue" and other war-related mental illnesses weren't discussed publicly. He was the first to do so, bringing national attention to veterans' mental health issues and making a lasting contribution to their treatment.

Audie Leon Murphy died in a Memorial Day weekend plane crash in 1971 while on a business trip. He was 46.

Alvin C. York

The Alvin C. York VA Medical Center in Murfreesboro, Tenn., is named in honor of "Sergeant York," a reluctant World War I draftee whose inner struggle and strength led him from near-conscientious objector to American hero.

He was born in the hills of Tennessee in 1887 and gained little more than a third-grade education. Up through his twenties, he was known as a backwoodsman with a deadly accurate shot, and a hellion who spent his time drinking, smoking and gambling.



Alvin C. York

In 1914, after a particularly hard night of drinking and fighting, his mother somehow convinced him to give up his way of life. Religious conversion soon followed. He joined the church and became an elder.

As he followed America's involvement in the war, he feared that "we were only fighting for a bunch of foreigners." York later wrote that he received assurance from God himself that the fight was a righteous one and that he would come out unscratched.

York was drafted at the age of 30. His church pastor prepared papers to exclude York from combat on religious grounds, but York refused to sign them. He was willing to serve, but refused to fight and kill.

Basic training gave York his first glimpse of the world beyond the mountains of Tennessee. He trained with the masses of urban draftees, but stood out as an expert shot, though he objected to firing at human silhouette targets.

After discussion and counsel with his superiors, York relinquished his pacifism. He was shipped to France in May 1918, and by the end of September, his unit had suffered many casualties to combat, artillery and gas attacks.

In October 1918, while fighting in the Argonne Forest, York's division was ordered to take a strategic hill and a nearby rail line. At zero hour, his unit went over the top of the trenches and, despite casualties, proceeded to take the hill.

They moved on to their next objective, the railway, but many in his company fell to withering German machine-gun fire. His unit was pinned down, surrounded on three sides by enemy machine-gun nests.

York and a few of his squad quietly moved around the German gun emplacements and ran into the headquarters of the enemy unit. They quickly took the entire command of largely unarmed Germans as prisoners.

York and his men planned to take their prisoners right through the enemy front line. Soon enemy gunners pinned them down again, but York found himself at a vantage point where he could see the German emplacements, but they had difficulty locating him.

As his men and their captives took cover, York began picking off the gunners one by one until he had killed more than 20 Germans. One of the German officers who had previously surrendered witnessed York's one-man assault on the German machine-gun nests and told him he would order their total surrender if York would just stop killing his men. York agreed and soon had nearly 100 prisoners marching back to friendly lines.

York was awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions, including killing 25 of the enemy, destroying 35 machine guns, capturing four officers and 128 men.

Upon York's return to New York City, he was singled out as America's greatest fighting hero. His hometown tried to build a new home for him, but left him with a half-finished house and a huge mortgage. He was wooed by big business searching for his endorsement of their products. He declined, saying, "This uniform ain't for sale."

York went on speaking tours to raise money for education, roads and job training in his native Appalachia. He considered running for public office, supporting Herbert Hoover in 1932 in opposition to FDR's promise to repeal prohibition. Roosevelt's New Deal policies brought him back into the democratic fold.

Alvin C. York died in 1964 after suffering a cerebral hemorrhage.

By Robert Turtill, *Vanguard* staff

Note: This is the third in a series of features about the historical figures for whom some of VA's facilities are named. In installment 4 of this series, we will feature two more individuals: One a world-class physician, medical school dean and influential chief medical director; the other, a popular U.S. Congressman and veterans' advocate.