Weispfenning Recalls Days When He Knew Audie Murphy

This is a reprint of an article from the September 27, 1956 Griggs County Sentinel Courier. I found it in the museum and it really shows how important museums can be in helping us remember the past.

Events of a winter in France and Germany twelve years ago were recalled this week by Walter Weispfenning, Bookkeeper at Reiten Manufacturing Co. in Cooperstown.

Weispfenning is the man who recommended Audie Murphy for the Congressional Medal of Honor following an action January 26, 1945, near Holzwihr, France.

“To Hell and Back” the movie version of Murphy’s autobiography is being shown Friday and Saturday at the Strand Theatre.

Weispfenning and Murphy were both lieutenants in the Third Infantry Division, Murphy in the 15th Infantry Regiment and Weispfenning in the 39th Field Artillery Battalion, which was the artillery support for the 15th. Weispfenning was the forward observer for the artillery and was working with the 15th.

The action for which Murphy, the most decorated soldier of World War II, was awarded the Medal of Honor, took place near a small town by a forest.

Two battalions of the 15th Infantry Regiment were holding a line along the south edge of a woods when the Germans moved out of the town and attacked. From his position near the edge of the forest, Weispfenning had a clear view of Murphy’s actions. The German tanks passed within 50 yards of Murphy’s position, not approaching any closer because of a burning tank destroyer nearby.

While the artillery tried to hold off the tanks, the German infantry line consisting of two full-strength companies of about 125 men each, started across the wide meadow, firing at Murphy.

With the Germans only 100 yards away and still moving up on him, Lt. Murphy climbed onto the slowly burning tank destroyer and began firing the machine gun at the approaching Germans. He was completely exposed and silhouetted against the background of bare trees and snow, with a fire under him that threatened to blow the destroyer to bits if it reached the gasoline and ammunition. Standing on top of the tank destroyer, Murphy raked the approaching enemy with machine-gun fire.

(Part of the foregoing account of the action was taken from Weispfenning’s account of it in the book, “The History of the Third Infantry Division in World War II”, part from Weispfenning’s verbal narration of it this week in an interview).

How well did Weispfenning know Murphy? About as well as you know anyone in the service, said Walt – you become well acquainted very quickly, you get moved around, sometime you keep in touch, sometimes not.

By the time the local man became acquainted with him, Lt. Murphy was already something of a legendary personage, having earned numerous medals for bravery in combat.

(Incidentally, Weispfenning is the holder of the Legion of Merit, the Air Medal, awarded in the European theater, and the European theater ribbon with 10 campaign stars).

One of the most interesting things to happen to Weispfenning because of having known Murphy occurred in March, 1949 when he was flown to Hollywood to take part in the “This Is Your Life” program. Mr. Weispfenning lived in Jamestown at that time.

Following the program the people who took part were given a dinner. They also were taken to Universal-International studio to see Bad Boy, Audie Murphy’s first motion picture. Murphy gave Weispfenning an autographed copy of “To Hell and Back” which had just been published.

Asked about the movie “To Hell and Back” Weispfenning said it followed the actual events pretty closely, but that the setting and ground conditions were entirely different. Flat land and forest were the rule in the actual scene, with a layer of snow on the ground that alternately thawed and froze again, making everyone filthy with mud. Other than that, he said, he enjoyed the movie when he saw it in Jamestown some time ago.