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AN EVENING WITH THE REAL FORREST GUMP AND OTHER HEROES

I have met the real Forrest Gump. Not the ninny sitting on a Savannah park bench, prattling about a box of chocolates. His name is Sammy L. Davis and he is a recipient of the Medal of Honor, this nation's highest award for military heroism.

The movie "Forrest Gump" borrowed heavily on Davis' real-live exploits in Vietnam, and the footage of Gump receiving his Medal of Honor from President Lyndon Johnson was actually Sammy L. Davis' body with Tom Hanks' head superimposed on it. Davis was pleased to be identified with the fictional Gump, but says his family back in Indiana was into catching catfish, not shrimp.

"Before you ask," he quipped, "I can tell you 21 ways to cook catfish."

I recently had a chance to talk to Davis, who was in Atlanta for a dinner hosted by the Medal of Honor Foundation. He and other Medal of Honor recipients had spent several days visiting local schools and talking to young people about courage, honor, valor and service — the attributes that brought them their singular recognition. The reception, I am happy to say, was extremely positive.

In our nation's history, 40 million Americans have served in the military. Of that total, slightly more than 3,400 have been awarded the Medal of Honor since its inception in 1862, including 21 Georgians. One hundred and five recipients are still living. At the dinner, 36 were in attendance. To borrow the young people's vernacular, being around these men if only for one evening was totally awesome.

Take Sgt. Davis for example. On November 18, 1967, his squad was overrun by an estimated 1,500 Viet Cong. Then-PFC Davis was knocked unconscious and badly injured by enemy fire. When he regained consciousness, he fired everything he could get his hands on at the enemy. Hearing calls for help from across the river, Davis, who couldn't swim because of his own serious injuries, paddled across on an air mattress. Reaching three wounded men, he stood up and fired into the jungle to prevent the Viet Cong from advancing and then administered morphine to his three wounded comrades. While the most seriously wounded soldier was helped across the river, Davis protected the two remaining until he could pull them to safety. Despite his wounds he refused medical attention, joining another crew and continuing to fight until the large Viet Cong force decided they had had enough of Davis and friends and retreated.

I asked Sgt. Davis what he was thinking while all of this was happening. He said, "You don't lose until you quit trying, and I wasn't about to quit trying." His heroic deeds were similar to other remarkable stories I heard that evening about the attending Medal of Honor recipients whose service spanned World War II, Korea and Vietnam. I also heard about some who didn't make it home.

To a person, the Medal of Honor recipients are humble and almost embarrassed at the attention they receive. And don't call them Medal of Honor "winners." They strongly object to that term. They will tell you that they only did what any of their compatriots would have done under similar circumstances.

Sitting at dinner it occurred to me that our value system is upside down these days. We have made heroes out of smug entertainers, overpaid athletes, blathering politicians and know-it-all journalists. None are heroes and, ironically, none would be around to preen for us were it not for the men and women of our Armed Forces who have stood in harm's way over the past two hundred-plus years and continue to do so today.

I now know what heroes look like. I saw a bunch of them the other night: Ordinary Americans who on one particular day risked it all for their country, their comrades and us. They don't seek our applause or our adulation. They ask nothing in return except that we appreciate the high cost of freedom and that we love our country as they do. NBC News anchor and banquet emcee Brian Williams said it best of the Medal of Honor recipients that evening: "We aren't worthy to breathe their air." Amen.