

What's Happening To the Heroes?

By TOM TIEDE

INDIANAPOLIS, Ind. (NEA)—A few months ago a Vietnam veteran named Dwight Johnson walked into a Detroit candy store and tried to rob it of, very nearly, peanuts. He was shot in the process and killed. The next day's news hit many Americans hard. For Johnson was no ordinary crook; he was holder of the nation's highest citation for courage—the Medal of Honor—and millions who read of his desperate end agonized over how this valiant soldier could have sunk so low.

The full answer, likely, is impossible to know.

But partial explanation should be obvious. The Medal of Honor is, after the shooting stops, only a ribbon on a lapel. It does not bestow sainthood; it is not a passport to success; it is no guarantee of privileges for its wearer.

Nobody knows this better than Medal winners themselves. And some of the 3,365 official, historic winners, in this war and others, have found out the hard way.

Take Gary Wetzel as another example. In some ways, except the ultimate, he parallels the Johnson tragedy. In fact, he knew Johnson. The two fought the war at the same time, did their heroics only a few days apart, and received their recognitions during the same ceremony, on Nov. 19, 1968, at the White House.

Then they both went their separate, but equally sad, ways.

Wetzel, red-haired, sharp-featured and 21, returned to his hometown, Milwaukee, "with my head in my rear end." That is, blinded by his own impatience. He had, after all, committed one of the most spectacularly courageous feats of the Vietnam war. As a helicopter door gunner, shot from the sky, missing an arm, wounded in three other places and fighting off unconsciousness, he singlehandedly fought off attacking enemy forces and then helped rescue (remember, his arm was blasted away) his copter commander. It was activity, as the Army said, "above and beyond the call of duty" and Gary Wetzel felt his nation should be grateful.

But the nation, or at least that part of it around Milwaukee, was not grateful enough for the ex-serviceman. The best job he could get was a welder "at three dollars-something an hour" and he felt such work beneath him. He tried to get a better job through the Veterans Administration but objected when it tried to steer him toward mechanics rather than something more executive. In time, he was complaining to newsmen that he was being neglected. He became the town's "Medal of Honor Pouter and Pontificator," as one of his friends says, "he had an ego bigger than all outdoors."

One night, in a bar, Wetzel's ego trespassed the bounds of good sense, and, as it happened, privacy. He got into an argument. A nasty one. The cops

were summoned, but Wetzel was undaunted by the blue. Harsh words were exchanged, some pushing and shoving, and the next day's news reports had it that a hysterical, one-armed Medal of Honor winner had tried to hit a cop in the eye with a prosthetic hook.

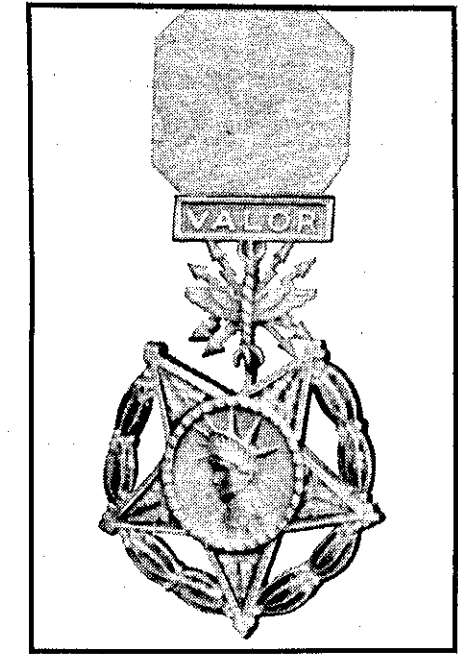
And so it was another name was added to Emerson's thought: "Every hero becomes a bore at last." One of nine children, a husband, a father, Gary Wetzel became a bore and an embarrassment to his family and public.

Fortunately, though, Wetzel did not wind up like Johnson. At about the time Johnson died in that Detroit robbery, Wetzel was deciding he would not allow himself the same deterioration. In his words: "I got rid of the chip on my shoulder."

As for his past: "Sometimes I wish I hadn't won the Medal. It can change you if you let it. Like me, it changed me for the worse. I thought the world owed me a loving. I was a real ass, I guess."

Despite Gary Wetzel's admirable introspection of the past few months, it should be said that his guilt was one of degree, not originality. There have been 195 Medal of Honor winners in Vietnam, 123 died there, and three have expired back home. Of the 69 still alive, many, if not most, have flirted with self-importance.

The flirtation is natural enough according to Tom Kelley, past president of the Medal of Honor Society (310 members).



The Medal of Honor—after the shooting stops, only a ribbon on a lapel. (INEA Photos)

Kelley, of New York City, won the Medal himself, in World War II, and knows whereof he speaks: "Well, you get such immediate attention after winning that it can be overwhelming. Some people think it'll last forever. So a lot of them go through the bit of the high and the mighty. We've had a number of fellows who get unfavorable writeups in the papers. But what they usually need is a few breaks and when they get them they straighten out. Almost all Medal winners wind up as law-abiding citizens."

One such citizen is Sammy Lee Davis, 22 years old, of West Salem, Ill. He was another soldier in the war with Wetzel and Johnson. And he was given his Medal of Honor in the same Nov. 19, 1968, ceremony.

Davis was cited for "intrepidity" while an artillery gunner. What he did was to assist three men during a skirmish in the Vietnam delta region. The three were across a river, wounded, cut off, with the enemy heading toward them; Davis, himself wounded, forded the water, in withering fire, and saved them.

Now he lives less aggressively in West Salem (pop. 1,000) where the only conflict going on is why the town is named West Salem when it's east of the real Salem. Davis prefers not to get involved, choosing instead to watch himself and his wife get fat (he's 220 now, she's pregnant), fishing twice weekly and racing motorcycles. "I got a 450-cc Honda in the yard. I use to own a half-dozen or so. But I'm not so hot about it as I was. I spend most of my time these days at demolition derbies."

If Sammy Davis ever flirted with a feeling of self-importance, he does not admit it. And in fact would have been sourly disillusioned if he had. He's plain folks in West Salem. He was born not far from the feed store. He lives in a small rented house where the living room opens on the bedroom and the airy windows testify that this is farm country. Now and then somebody asks him to make a speech, which he does happily.

but there's little fuss over the home-town hero.

"I remember there was a fuss when I first won the Medal. The owner of a local factory called on me and said, 'Don't worry about a thing, we'll give you a job and take care of you.' So I went to work with him. I've been there three years now. I'm a sheet-metal puncher, and I make \$1.80 an hour. So you see I'm not getting rich or anything. And that's the way it should be, shouldn't it? I don't see any reason why the Medal should make me a big man in West Salem."

But while the winners strive to avoid controversy, some will not run from it. There are problems connected with the Medal of Honor, and some admit it. Sgt. Ken Stumpf, as example, complains his Medal (he won it for blasting an enemy bunker) is in some ways very degrading. "It makes you a target for every jealous freak around. If I walk into a bar with 10 guys there, and I say hello to nine of them, the one fellow I missed will sure as hell get hot about it and start something."

And, too, there are special problems connected with winning the Medal in Vietnam. Stumpf says he would rather have won the honor in a war people supported. Another winner, Capt. Walter J. Marm, still in service, says he has received hate mail from antiwar protesters. And almost to a man the heroes feel, as does Air Force Capt. James Fleming, it is regrettable the Nam is a no-win war: "We should win full military victory (or) get the hell out... the middle road has proven a failure."

And if the complaints sometimes sound shrill, one winner says the \$100 a month given to all recipients is "chintzy" it is all quite normal. For the complainers in this case are all quite normal. Just men. Not supermen. Just men. The things they have done were superb and unselfish. But they are mortal—capable, as Dwight Johnson was, of hard error, or, as most other, of decency and routine.



DWIGHT JOHNSON: He was no ordinary thief.



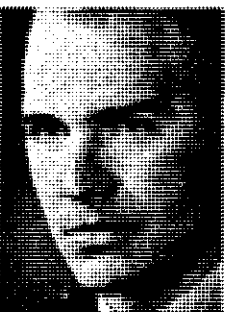
GARY WETZEL: An ego "bigger than all outdoors?"



SAMMY DAVIS: Is he "a big man in West Salem?"



KEN STUMPF: Can the Medal of Honor be degrading?



WALTER MARM: He receives hate mail.



JIM FLEMING: Middle of the road is a failure.

THE WINNERS. EXTRAORDINARY IN WAR... BUT IN PEACE, ONLY MEN.