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Mission: To provide a venue for past and present members of the 16th Infantry Regiment to share in the history and well-earned camaraderie of the US Army's greatest regiment.

A Hero Remembered

Phillip Hall

On 6 December 2012, the US Air Force dedicated a statue to one of its heroes at Kirtland Air Force Base near Albuquerque, NM. The statue was of Airman 1st Class William H. Pitsenbarger, known as "Pits" by us grunts for the little time we were lucky enough to share his acquaintance. Among the many in attendance at the ceremony were former Secretary of the Air Force Whit Peters, members of the "Bien Hoa Eagles," and Ron Haley and me from the Mud Soldiers of Charlie Company, 2nd Battalion, 16th Infantry.



**1st Class
William H. Pitsenbarger**

On 11 April 1966, Charlie Company participating in a major search and destroy mission named Operation ABILENE about thirty miles east of Saigon. At mid-day the point platoon made contact with elements of the D800, a Viet Cong regular battalion that the 2-16 IN was searching for. In that contact, Charlie Company had found the object of the mission, but soon found itself in trouble when the D800 ambushed the company. The D800's base camp was only a short distance away, so the Viet Cong knew the ground and had prepared the area well. While the company leaders stopped to assess what they were facing, the D800 circled around and closed the rear of the kill sack. Within a short time, Charlie Company had a number of KIAs and wounded and needed to get them out of the area.

Help came from the Air Force's Detachment 6, 38th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron (the Bien Hoa Eagles). The triple canopy jungle made it impossible for the Army's Hueys to land anywhere nearby. The Air Force Huskies, however, could lower litters through the canopy and winch out the wounded. If necessary, a pararescue man (or "PJ") could also ride down in the litter to treat the wounded and aid in their evacuation. On his second trip over the battle area, Airman Pitsenbarger volunteered to do just that. While on the ground, Pits' Husky took heavy fire and the crew directed him to get in the litter while he could. Pitsenbarger waved them off. He decided instead to stay with Charlie Company and continued to treat the wounded. Later, Pits picked up an M 16 and became a rifleman during heavy periods of attack on the perimeter.

Sadly, Pitsenbarger was killed in action while helping his brothers in arms. The morning report for 11 April 1966 showed 134 soldiers and officers in the field that day. By the end of the next day, nearly 40 members of Charlie Company were killed or mortally wounded and another

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75 were wounded. Among the dead was Pits. From that moment on, he belonged not only to the Bien Hoa Eagles but to the Mud Soldiers of Charlie Company for whom he gave up his life to both treat and defend.

In the memory of, and in gratitude for, Pits' sacrifice, members of the Bien Hoa Eagles and the 16th Infantry worked with the Air Force Sergeants Association to obtain a long overdue recognition for this American Hero and in December 2000, Pitsenbarger was awarded the Medal of Honor. Many members of the Bien Hoa Eagles and of the Mud Soldiers were present to honor Bill when the Secretary of the Air Force presented the medal to Bill's father. A1C William H. Pitsenbarger's name now shares a paver with Sergeant James Robinson (the other Medal of Honor winner from that day) outside the 1st Infantry Division Headquarters at Fort Riley, KS. Pits' blood is eternally mixed with that of the Mud Soldiers and he'll remain our brother forever.

Battle of Xã Cam My (Courtenay Plantation) 11 April 1966



**Battle of Courtenay Plantation
11 April 1966, Initial Action**



**Battle of Courtenay Plantation
11 April 1966, Battle**

On 11 April 1966, Company C, 2d Battalion, 16th Infantry, was operating 7 kilometers east of the village of Xã Cam My near Courtenay Rubber Plantation in South Vietnam. The company, commanded by Captain William R. Nolan, was participating in Operation ABILENE, a 1st Infantry Division effort designed to bring elusive VC units to battle. At about 0730, the company moved out in search of the D800 Battalion, a well-trained VC Regular unit. Beginning about 1100, the company made several successive contacts, but no firm firefights developed. About 1355, a VC force estimated at platoon strength opened fire and wounded two men. Nolan stopped the company to evacuate the men, but it was a decision which proved to be very costly. Unknowingly, the company had almost stumbled into the D800 Battalion's base camp which was only 150 yards away. As Nolan tried to medevac the two casualties, the D800 Battalion quickly and quietly surrounded the company. Unfortunately, the company did not form a tight perimeter before the enemy attacked and the initial defense was disjointed. Still located forward of the company, the now isolated 3rd Platoon called for artillery to break up an enemy force massing to their front. The initial shells landed right on target, but on the second salvo, the shells landed in the platoon area, killing or wounding a number of men. When the platoon called off the fires, the VC used the lull to move in even closer to pick off the Americans by sniper fire. The company was in a trap and Nolan decided to pull back, but soon found he was unable to due to the number of already dead and wounded. When the other platoons attempted to move into a tighter perimeter they were driven to the ground by intense small arms fire as well. About 1540, Air Force rescue teams came in to evacuate the dead and the wounded, and miraculously, they were able to rescue twelve men during the fighting. When the situation became too hot and the Air Force choppers were forced to leave, one of the rescue team members, A1C William H. Pitsenbarger, remained with Charlie Company. Pitsenbarger's efforts to save lives that day resulted in him receiving the Medal of Honor, but also resulted in his own death. The terrific firefight continued

throughout the afternoon and into the evening. There were several breakout attempts, but all failed. One by one the company's leaders became casualties. Nolan and Ken Alderson, the XO, were both wounded. All the platoon leaders and platoon sergeants were killed or wounded. To make matters worse, at about 1745, the VC emplaced ten machine guns, including at least two .50 calibers (or .51 calibers) to rake the company. In a chopper above the desperate fight, Major Bibb Underwood, the battalion executive officer, assisted in bringing artillery fire in as close to the perimeter as possible while B Company, the nearest unit at a kilometer away, struggled through the thick foliage trying to reach their fellow Rangers. Throughout the afternoon, Sergeant James W. Robinson of Annandale, Virginia, was fighting with the heart of a tiger. Grabbing an M-79 grenade launcher, he silenced several snipers, then, spotting two wounded men laying outside the line, he bravely bolted to them and dragged them into the perimeter to dress their wounds. Later he collected and redistributed weapons and ammo and then dragged another man to safety, though he, too, was wounded in the effort. As he bandaged his own wounds, Robinson spotted a .50-caliber machine gun that had caused much damage. He shouted to his men, "I see the .50! I'm going for it. Cover me!" Out of ammo, Robinson grabbed two grenades and pulled the pins. Taking a deep breath, the sergeant made a mad dash at the gun, the whole time bullets zipping past him. One tracer round set his pant leg on fire as he ran. He made it to within thirty feet of the machine gun and lobbed the grenades into the position just as he fell dead from two .50-caliber hits in the chest. His aim was true, however, and the VC position was eliminated in a blinding flash. For his indomitable courage that day, Robinson earned the regiment's ninth Medal of Honor. As darkness enveloped the battlefield, small arms fire slackened but did not cease. The company was able to keep the artillery dropping HE (high explosive) rounds very close to the perimeter and flares above the position as well. After midnight, the survivors noticed the VC fire go slack in the dark. In the perimeter, men scrambled to help their wounded buddies,

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redistribute weapons and ammo, and plug holes in the line. The badly wounded were dragged to the center of the position but those wounded troops who could still fire stayed on the line, determined to resist to the last if necessary. The men of the company were aware that the VC could resume their assault at any moment, but for the next three hours the area remained quiet. Hopes soared as streaks of light to the east announced the dawn of 12 April. At about 0715, the troops of B Company made contact with the remnants of C Company. Soon after, helicopters arrived with massive assistance. First in were the engineers who started clearing an LZ to get the casualties out, followed by medics, who went right to work patching up the wounded while they waited to be evacuated. The Charlie Rangers had held on and handed the D800 Battalion a significant defeat. The VC suffered 41 known KIA by known body count and an unknown number of others killed or wounded (some estimates ran as high as 150 KIA, but that is likely too high). If one takes the historical estimates of 3.5 wounded to every KIA, the D800 Battalion would have suffered at least another roughly 143 WIAs, or about 184 total casualties (which is likely too low) out of somewhere between an estimated 300 to 400 men. The enemy had also failed to overrun and destroy C Company which was clearly the enemy commander's intent, although the company had suffered 35 killed and 71 wounded of the 134 soldiers who entered the fight. For their actions on 11–12 April 1966, C Company was later awarded the Valorous Unit Award by the Secretary of the Army on 23 April 1968.