

PJ COMMUNITY REMEMBERS FALLEN HERO, FRIEND

By Tech. Sgt. Ginger Schreitmueller
Air Force Special Operations Command Public Affairs

HURLBURT FIELD, Fla. (Night Flyer News Service) -- For six weeks, Airman 1st Class Ryan Hall spent hours polishing a small bronze plaque outside the Pararescue Indoctrination Course at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas.

The 21-year-old, now assigned to the 23rd Special Tactics Squadron, here, first saw the plaque as mere words etched in metal. But, with each touch of the cloth, each day he survived some of the toughest training the Air Force has to offer, he began to understand.

It is not solely a memorial in metal -- it is a reflection of one man's unfaltering belief in the simple Pararescue creed: ***That Other's May Live***. The plaque reminds those enduring the course about one of their own -- Airman 1st Class William "Pits" Pitsenbarger Jr.

It was April 11, 1966, when Detachment 6, 38th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron, out of Bien Hoa, Vietnam, was called in to support a medevac mission. Pitsenbarger, a native of Ohio, was on the second of two HH-43 Huskie helicopters sent in to retrieve the wounded and dead from elements of the Army's 1st Infantry Division, which was surrounded by enemy forces a few miles east of Saigon.

The only way to get the wounded out of the jungle was with hoist-equipped helicopters. This wasn't a new mission for Pitsenbarger, who was just 21 years old. He had been "in country" since the previous August, and had already seen nearly 300 rescue missions.

The choppers launched that afternoon, vectored in on the American forces and went in. On scene, "Pits" volunteered to go down the line and administer emergency treatment to the most seriously wounded, and to assist with the extraction of wounded soldiers.

One of the platoon leaders on the ground said he was astonished to look up and see the PJ voluntarily descending from the helicopter through a hail of bullets.

"To put down on paper what that battle was like is an impossible task," said then-1st Lt. Martin Kroah. "At times the small arms fire would be so intense that it was deafening, and all a person could do was get as close to the ground as possible and pray."

As soon as the penetrator touched the ground, "Pits" jumped off and began treating the wounded. In the next few hours, the rescue crews made five flights in and out of the area. On the sixth flight, the chopper was hit by enemy fire. The cable holding the stokes litter was cut as the pilot fought to keep the aircraft from crashing into the trees.

Due to heavy enemy fire, and no backup fire support, the choppers were pulled out of the area. Pitsenbarger elected to stay at the battlesite to aid the wounded until reinforcements and artillery could clear the way for additional rescues.

Army Sergeant Fred Navarro, a squad leader with the trapped Charlie Company, remembered watching the Air Force PJ operating under heavy sniper fire.

"He gave his pistol to one of the wounded men who couldn't hold a rifle. He then took the wounded soldier's rifle and moved from place to place, while under fire," said Navarro. "He was collecting ammo from the dead and giving it to the wounded. He went back out, running all around the perimeter collecting ammo. The he redistributed ammo to each soldier that was still alive."

Kroah also witnessed the PJ's heroic actions.

"On three separate occasions he exposed himself to enemy fire. It took tremendous courage to expose himself to the possibility of an almost certain death in order to save the life of someone he didn't know," he said. "I'm certain the death count would have been much higher had it not been for the heroic efforts of Airman Pitsenbarger."

Fellow PJ, then-Airman 1st Class Harry O'Beirne, said Pitsenbarger's actions didn't surprise those who knew him.

"He had done this many times before. He knew the score pretty well and he had been fired at quite a bit. He knew the chance he was taking; it was not a case of going in there blindly," said O'Beirne, who was assigned to Bien Hoa with Pitsenbarger.

After the choppers had returned to home base at Bien Hoa, the word came down that the Army company and Pitsenbarger were moving to another spot, and were OK. Further rescue and extraction wasn't needed that night. They waited anxiously for the next day, to go back and retrieve the wounded and bring their fellow PJ back to base. The next morning they found out the information was crossed; the company hadn't moved and the battle was still going on.

O'Beirne was on the first alert chopper out and when they arrived on scene was lowered to the ground to continue evacuation efforts. On the ground, O'Beirne remembers an Army lieutenant who was seriously wounded and said he needed to be sure someone knew about the heroic actions of the airman, and what he had done for Charlie Company. The story he told would end with the solemn statement, "I'm sorry. Your friend didn't make it."

Somewhere around 7:30 p.m. the night before, the PJ had been killed. O'Beirne found his friend's body and would bring him out of the jungle that day.

"I was very angry. I don't know why, just very angry," said O'Beirne. "You do everything as you're trained to do; it's part of the job. I was stepping over some 81 dead GIs, and about 100 wounded. Later, as you have time to sit around, it hits you."

Of the 180 men that were involved in the firefight in that patch of jungle that day, few would escape uninjured.

At a ceremony in the Pentagon, Sept. 22, 1966, Mr. and Mrs. Pitsenbarger were presented their son's Air Force Cross, as well as the Airman's Medal, four Air Medals and the Purple Heart for other missions the young PJ had flown in Vietnam.

Though the Air Force Cross is the highest medal the Air Force can bestow, those who knew him and those who saw what happened that night didn't give up the fight to have the Pararescue jumper's memory and actions honored with the Congressional Medal of Honor.

Now, after nearly 35 years, William Pitsenbarger Sr. received his son's Congressional Medal of Honor during a ceremony at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio, Dec. 8.

Master Sgt. Scotty Gearen, operations superintendent at the 23rd TS, was among the more than 300 PJs who attended the ceremony.

"Pits' lived by the motto," he said, "and has always been our guide post for courage and devotion to duty. I hope that if I ever find myself in similar circumstances I would have the courage that he displayed."

For those who knew "Pits," there was never a doubt that his actions that night merited the nation's highest honor.

"He died doing his job," said Dave Milsten, who was the noncommissioned officer in charge of the PJ section at Bien Hoa. "If he would have known the consequences of going down that hoist it wouldn't have slowed him up a bit."

"He was very patriotic, truly patriotic," said O'Beirne. "He was one of those people that you thought wrapped the flag around them when they went to bed at night. He was tall, very fit and very gung-ho. Bill was very likeable -- he probably had his faults, but no one working with him could say just what they were."

In a statement, U.S. Rep. John Boehner (R-OH), told his colleagues in the House the Medal of Honor was long overdue for Airman Pitsenbarger.

"(He) showed honor in a time of tremendous pressure. He put other lives before his own. He put his country before his self-interest and he proved that America would remain the land of the free and fight for the freedom of others by showing it was still the land of the brave," said the congressman.

It's that sense of duty and honor, and the chance to help others that Airman Hall said attracted him to the Pararescue career field.

Though not a PJ long enough to even get his beret dirty, Airman Hall says he's come to realize the legacy of Airman William "Pits" Pitsenbarger is what earns a man the right to wear the distinctive maroon beret of Pararescue.

"You can't ask more from an individual than what Airman Pitsenbarger gave," said Hall. "It changes your perspective about Pararescue. It's not a job; it's a way of life. It's not something you can explain; it's personal."

Outside the PJ schoolhouse at Kirtland Air Force Base, N.M., there's another plaque that echoes the perspective of Airman Hall and other PJs:

"For those who've never been there, no explanation is possible. For those who have, no explanation is needed."

(Special thanks to PJs Harry O'Beirne, Robert LaPointe, Jim Watson and Senior Master Sgt. Ernie Evans for their assistance in gathering information and ensuring the accuracy of this article.)

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Airman Pitsenbarger on the tarmac at Bien Hoa.



Airman Pitsenbarger stands outside a helo.



Images of Airman 1st Class William Pitsenbarger, courtesy of the U.S. Air Force Museum photo archives.

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PITSMOH.JPG

Alice Pitsenbarger observes at right as her husband, William F. Pitsenbarger, center, accepts the Medal of Honor on behalf of his son, Airman 1st Class William F. Pitsenbarger, from Secretary of the Air Force Whit Peters, during a ceremony Dec. 8 at the U.S. Air Force Museum at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio. (Photo by Tech. Sgt. Gary Ccpage)

On December 8, 2000 an impressive ceremony was held at Wright-Patterson AFB in Pits' home state of Ohio. The guest list included combat veterans, hundreds of pararescue airmen, a Congressional representative, and the Air Force Chief of Staff. Also attending was an elderly gentleman, now well into his 80s....William F. Pitsenbarger. Amid a flood of memories, an invocation by the Chief of the Air Force Chaplain Service, and remarks by the Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force, Secretary of the Air Force the Honorable F. Whitten Peters stepped to the podium. Then, with the dignity unprecedented valor demands, the story of William Pitsenbarger was read in greater detail than his Air Force Cross citation had set forth. At long last, after 34 years, the young PJ would indeed receive the Medal of Honor. The elder Pitsenbarger gratefully accepted the award on behalf of his only son.

LOCAL/STATE

Pitsenbarger to

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PIQUA — After 34 years the waiting is finally over for former Piqua resident Frank Pitsenbarger.

This afternoon the U.S. Congress is expected to take the final action needed to award the Medal of Honor to Pitsenbarger's son, William H. Pitsenbarger who died April 11, 1966 while repeatedly attempting to save the lives of others during an evacuation attempt in a jungle in South Vietnam.

Frank Pitsenbarger, now a resident of Muncie, Ind., has asked that the award be presented at Wright Patterson Air Force Base.

"They asked me where I wanted it presented," he said. "Bill's friends and my friends have been very interested in seeing this happen. They really should have the right to see it."

Dec. 8 is the target date for the presentation.

"Normally, it's the president who

presents the Medal of Honor, but we've received no formal word," Pitsenbarger said.

Pitsenbarger was nominated for the Medal of Honor shortly after his death but instead was awarded the Air Force Cross, the Air Force's highest honor.

Airman First Class William Pitsenbarger joined the Air Force right after graduating from Piqua Central High School in 1962. After basic training he was assigned to the security police career field but was not satisfied with his superior's decision and volunteered to join the Air Force Pararescue.

Pitsenbarger received months of training in order to qualify for the Pararescue team.

"Bill got his orders to go to Okinawa. But he volunteered to go to Vietnam. Bill thought he belonged over there," Frank Pitsenbarger said.

"He was a very fine young man. He had a lot of patriotism. He had no fear

of anything. It was quite a blow," he said of his only child's untimely death.

One special friend who will be pres-

Opinion Back Talk

ROBERT F. DORR

Vietnam-era pararescueman deserves Medal of Honor



"Here was an Air Force guy helping Army soldiers he didn't know, trying to rescue as many as possible."

In a furious battle in Vietnam 34 years ago, an Air Force pararescueman gave his life to save others.

Now, finally, he may receive the recognition he should have had all along.

Airman 1st Class William H. "Pits" Pitsenbarger was a pararescue specialist aboard an HH-43F Huskie helicopter. His unit was the 38th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron. He was a three-striper, equivalent in rank to today's senior airman.

On April 11, 1966, Pitsenbarger's helicopter was called in to help evacuate American casualties from a dense jungle 35 miles east of Saigon. An Army outfit known as Charlie Company, 16th Infantry Regiment, was caught in an ongoing firefight with Vietcong guerrillas.

From overhead, Pitsenbarger volunteered to ride a rescue hoist 200 feet down through triple-canopy jungle. On the ground, he organized rescue efforts. He helped many seriously wounded

officers. He returned it to the U.S. command in Saigon, which was run by the Army. There, the No. 2 officer in Vietnam, Army Lt. Gen. John A. Heintges, signed a recommendation that Pitsenbarger be awarded the Air Force Cross instead, and this was done.

The Air Force Cross is a serious form of recognition. But for decades, those who fought with Pitsenbarger have wondered why the pararescueman did not receive the higher award.

Within the pararescue community, the myth persists that the Air Force downgraded Pitsenbarger's award because he was an enlisted man. Of 12 Medals of Honor awarded in Vietnam, 11 went to officers. Although pararescue specialists distinguished themselves in combat, none was ever awarded the Medal of Honor.

Research demonstrates that the Air Force wanted the airman to receive the medal. It still does.

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itens.

"We were going to go to college together when we got out," O'Beirne said of his friendship with Pitsenbarger.

"When he was killed I was the one who went in the next day to get his body out and I was the one who wrote the letter to his parents. They asked me to stop by

and see them when I got home."

O'Beirne did just that after leaving

until until the early 20s when some of

his classmates came forward to request that a memorial be named in his honor," Vollette said.

Today, Piqua families may enjoy many activities at Pitsenbarger Sports Complex on South Street.

Because of this project, Vollette said he was able to get to know Frank Pitsenbarger and a group of Piqua residents

meeting meetings and meetings and

him, including Wright Patterson's Pitsenbarger's Enlisted Men's Dining Hall. The Dayton Air Force Museum has dedicated two displays honoring Pitsenbarger's service that included some 250 missions in Vietnam.

And the Air Force Sergeants Association has named its award for heroism after Pitsenbarger.

after Pitsenbarger.