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USAF People

USAF People is a monthly feature of the USAF Museum web site presenting information from our archives about famous Air Force personnel.

William Pitsenbarger was featured during April 1998.



On April 11th, 1966, 21-year old A1C William H. Pitsenbarger of Piqua, Ohio was killed while defending some of his wounded comrades. For his bravery and sacrifice, he was posthumously awarded the nation's second highest military decoration, the Air Force Cross.

"Pits", as he was known to his friends, was nearing his 300th combat mission on that fateful day when some men of the U.S. Army's 1st Division were ambushed and pinned down in an area about 45 miles east of Saigon. Two HH-43 "Huskie" helicopters of the USAF's

38th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron were rushed to the scene to lift out the wounded. Pits was a pararescueman (PJ) on one of them. Upon reaching the site of the ambush, Pits was lowered through the trees to the ground where he attended to the wounded before having them lifted to the helicopter by cable. After six wounded men had been flown to an aid station, the two USAF helicopters returned for their second loads. As one of them lowered its litter basket to Pitsenbarger, who had remained on the ground with the 20 infantrymen still alive, it was hit by a burst of enemy small-arms fire. When its engine began to lose power, the pilot realized he had to get the Huskie away from the area as soon as possible. Instead of climbing into the litter basket so he could leave with the helicopter, Pits elected to remain with the Army troops under enemy attack and he gave a "wave-off" to the helicopter which flew away to safety.

Pits continued to treat the wounded and, when the others began running low on ammunition, he gathered ammo clips from the dead and distributed them to those still alive. Then, he joined the others with a

rifle to hold off the Viet Cong. About 7:30 PM that evening, Bill Pitsenbarger was killed by Viet Cong snipers. When his body was recovered the next day, one hand still held a rifle and the other a medical kit.

- Photo Gallery

#4

WIDE USAF - AIR FORCE CROSS PRESENTED -

Airman First Class William H. Pitsenbarger an Air Force para-rescue medic who was killed in action in Vietnam on April 11, 1966 was today posthumously awarded the Air Force Cross, the nation's second highest award for valor. The presentation was made in the Pentagon by Air Force Chief of Staff General John P. McConnell to the airman's parents Mr. and Mrs. William Pitsenbarger of Piqua, Ohio. The parents also received their son's Airman's Medal, Purple Heart and four Air Medals. The 21 year old airman was killed by Viet Cong after he volunteered to be lowered from an Air Force rescue helicopter to assist wounded U.S. ground troops.

OFFICIAL U.S. AIR FORCE PHOTO RELEASED
BY THE DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE WASHINGTON,
D.C. 22 SEPT. 1966

Bill Pitsenbarger

File = PJ9



Rededication

Good afternoon,

Distinguished visitors, ladies, and gentlemen,

I will speak about Bill Pitsenbarger, and the heritage that he and other airmen like him created for us all to follow - but first I would like to read a statement from a U.S. Infantry lieutenant that was near Bill on the night that he died. I do this so that you might get the feel of the man that you have named to school for.

On April 11, 1966, I, Martin Kroah, then a 1st Lt., platoon leader, C company, 2nd. Battalion, 16th Infantry, 1st. Infantry Division in South Vietnam. At noon on that day our company made contact with an enemy force of approx. 500 Viet Cong. A firefight started and lasted into the early hours of the following morning. When the battle was over the company had received 80% casualties. I'm not certain of the number of dead or wounded exactly but I'm certain that the death count would have been much higher had it not been for the heroic efforts of Airman William H. Pitsenbarger.

I first saw Airman Pitsenbarger when he was being lowered from an Air Force helicopter sent to medevac our wounded. I observed him several more times during the course of the day. To put down on paper what that battle was like is an impossible task. 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. It was on these occasions that I saw Airman Pitsenbarger moving around and pulling wounded men out of the line of fire and then bandaging their wounds. My own platoon medic, who was later killed, was totally ineffective. He was frozen with fear, unable to move. The firing was so intense that a fire team leader in my platoon curled up in a fetal position and sobbed uncontrollably. He had seen combat in both WW11 and Korea. The psychological pressure was beyond comprehension.

For Airmen Pitsenbarger to expose himself, on 3 separate occasions to this enemy fire was certainly above and beyond the call of duty of any man. 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 even know. I believe the Airman Pitsenbarger's actions that day are deserving of the highest possible honor that his country can give - The Medal of Honor. Lt Martin Kroah.

Much will be said of Bill Pitsenbarger's bravery and patriotism, but I would like you to know a little of Pits himself. He was an unassuming fellow, good-natured, didn't smoke, liked to drink a beer, and had a healthy liking for girls. He had a very gung-ho attitude, volunteered for anything that came along, and hated red-tape. He and I lived in a hooch with 30 other guys, our beds, our lockers, and our field gear. He slept in the bunk below me, and when one of us got out of bed the other would have to wait till he got out of the way before getting out of bed. He liked country music. One night he dragged me off to listen to Roy Acuff and his band sing the Warbash Cannon Ball. An enterprising cook had acquired a stove and set up shop cooking pizzas. Pits, myself, and our fellow airmen would buy several pizzas, a case of beer, and enjoy ourselves, - then sleep late in the morning, get up, drink warm beer and eat cold pizza after breaking off the places weree the rats had nibbled. He really was an ordinary fellow who did

Airman First Class William H. Pittsenbarger (Posthumous)

Incident date: 11 April 1966

Aircraft position: Pararescue Technician

Place of incident: 33 miles Southeast of Bien Hoa, South Vietnam

Unit: Detachment 6, 38 Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron

Location of unit: Bien Hoa AB, Republic of Vietnam

Synopsis: On 11 April 1966, three HH-43 helicopters from

Detachment 6, 38 ARRS were launched to evacuate wounded Army personnel from a fire-fight 33 miles SE of Bien Hoa AB, Republic of Vietnam. "Pedro 73," A1C Pittsenbarger's HH-43 helicopter, was able to evacuate one severely wounded soldier to Binh Ba Field Hospital, 8 miles South. Later, "Pedro 73" returned to the extraction site. They lowered A1C Pittsenbarger to the ground by hoist. to assist with litter loading and provide emergency medical care. Afterwards, the helicopter returned to Binh Ba with another litter patient. "Pedro 73" and "Pedro 97" attempted to return to evacuate more wounded and pick up A1C Pittsenbarger. While enroute, they were advised that the fire-fight had intensified. As "Pedro 73" was lowering the Stokes litter for another pick-up, they began receiving heavy small arms fire. The aircraft commander immediately sheared the hoist and pulled out. The aircraft made it back to Binh Ba, but received major battle damage.

When another HH-43 returned the following morning to recover more wounded, the crew learned that A1C Pittsenbarger had died during the previous night's battle. The area had come under a sustained attack of snipers and mortars cutting off portions of the Army unit that A1C Pittsenbarger was with. The battle ground was quiet that morning, so the HH-43 lowered another pararescueman to search for A1C Pittsenbarger. When the PJ located his team-mate, his rifle was still in his hands. Airman Pittsenbarger had assisted the Army during the night time fire-fight by retrieving weapons and ammunition from fallen comrades delivering them to other soldiers. (7:--)

When found, A1C Pittsenbarger had been shot at least five times and killed. A1C William C. Pittsenbarger received the Air Force Cross for extraordinary heroism. (4:14)

See TABs B, K, and L for reference material

AFETH

GRADUATING CROSS

Good morning gentleman. My name is Harry O'Beirne. I am an old USAF Pararescueman from the Vietnam era, and I feel privileged to be with you this morning. I was stationed with Bill Pitsenbarger at Bien Hoa Air Base, Vietnam, and he is the reason that I have been invited here. He was the first enlisted man to be officially awarded the Air Force Cross, and it is currently in the mill to be upgraded to the Medal of Honor. Bill slept in the bunk below me in our "beautiful" hooch that we shared with thirty other guys. When one of us got out of bed, the other guy would have to wait until he moved before the second fellow could get out of bed. In other words, we got to know each other very well over a period of eight months.

On April 11th, 1966, Bill was on first alert duty with the chopper crew. At that time the Air Force was the only one in country with hoist capabilities. Whenever a pilot got shot down, a squad got ambushed, or an army company got surrounded - we were called out to help. On this day Charlie company of the 16th. Infantry Regiment, of Big Red One (First Infantry Division) got waylaid and ambushed. The army called on us to help airlift wounded out. Pits and crew flew out to help with another chopper flying back-up. Once they got there it was obvious that there was a lot of wounded so Pits was lowered in to help organize the evacuation of the wounded. The HH-43 rescue choppers were small and could only take three litter-wounded at a time. After several trips in by both choppers under fire, the VC put several holes in the chopper over the rescue site. One of the bullets jammed open the fuel control system pouring fuel into the engine. The chopper literally flew itself out of the jungle hole. The mechanic had to cut the hoist cable, and the pilot, by flying the chopper nose tilted to the ground, managed to get it back to Binh Ba, the staging area. The other chopper wanted to go in but the army ordered them out because of the very heavy ground fire. Any chopper going in at that moment would have been shot down. Back at our base we didn't know what was happening, but the army radioed us that all was well, the company was moving out to a different location, and our guy was safe.

The next morning I was on first alert. About 0930 hours we got a call from the army asking where the hell we were. The troops were still surrounded and they needed us. Out we went. It seems that Charlie company tried to move out but the VC cut off their route, surrounded them, and then overran most of them that night. When I was lowered in there were 30 or so dead and the rest were wounded. It turns out that there were 80 dead and the

rest, about 100, were wounded. All the medics were dead so I started to lend a hand with the wounded. An army captain stopped me and told me he was sorry that my buddy was killed. That was the first I knew of Pits being killed. The captain pointed in the direction of Pit's body. I searched and founded it covered by a poncho. Bill had been shot four times - right thigh, lower back, right shoulder (front) and right between the eyes. His wounds point out that he was shot three times before the final bullet. While on the ground attending to the remaining wounded I talked with one of the army sergeants who told me of Bill's actions that night. After the USAF chopper was forced out, Bill continued to see to the wounded. The a decision was made to move out and Bill started to cut down saplings to make stretchers for the wounded. However, the enemy fire intensified and that decision was aborted. Young Army troopers, scared, not able to see the enemy, started to fire on automatic and burned up their ammo. Soon their were calls of "I'm out of ammo", "Medic", or "I'm hit". Bill crawled around tending to the wounded and picking up ammo for distribution to other soldiers. I understand that the enemy fire was pretty heavy at that time. Even though he was wounded, Pitsenbarger continued to help the other wounded - to me this is the highest form of valor.

Gentlemen, it is said that courage is not the absence of fear but the ability to carry on with dignity in spite of it.

Pitsenbarger was a 3 striper like you. You too can be like him.

DON'T be afraid to take risks; Mistakes are a fact of life. It is by taking chances that we become brave.

DON'T ever give up when you have something else to give - nothing is ever over till you stop trying or you are dead.

LASTLY,

DON'T ever undermine your own worth by comparing yourself to others. It is because we are different that each of us is special.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I wish you the very best in your chosen career.