

By John L. Frisbee, Contributing Editor

"That Others May Live"

A1C Bill Pitsenbarger knew the risks involved when he volunteered to drop into the midst of a jungle firefight.

By April 1966, 21-year-old A1C William H. Pitsenbarger, then in the final months of his enlistment, had seen more action than many a 30-year veteran. Young Pitsenbarger had gone through long and arduous training for duty as a pararescue medic with the Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service and had completed more than 300 rescue missions in Vietnam, many of them under heavy enemy fire. He wore the Air Medal with five oak leaf clusters; recommendations for four more were pending. A few days earlier, he had ridden a chopper winch line into a minefield to save a wounded ARVN soldier.

His service with the ARRS convinced Pitsenbarger that he wanted a career as a medical technician. He had applied to Arizona State University for admission in the fall. But that was months away. He had a job to do in Vietnam, and, as rescue pilot Capt. Dale Potter said, Pitsenbarger "was always willing to get into the thick of the action where he could be the most help."

On April 11 at 3 p.m., while Pitsenbarger was off duty, a call for help came into his unit, Det. 6, 38th ARR Squadron, at Bien Hoa. Elements of the Army's 1st Infantry Division were surrounded by enemy forces near Cam My, a few miles east of Saigon, in thick jungle with the tree canopies reaching up to 150 feet. The only way to get the wounded out was with hoist-equipped helicopters. Pitsenbarger asked to go with one of the two HH-43 Huskies scrambled on this hazardous mission.

Half an hour later, both choppers found an area where they could hover and lower a winch line to the surrounded troops. Pitsenbarger volunteered to go down the line, administer emergency treatment to the most seriously wounded, and explain

how to use the Stokes litter that would hoist casualties up to the chopper.

It was standard procedure for a pararescue medic to stay down only long enough to organize the rescue effort. Pitsenbarger decided, on his own, to remain with the wounded. In the next hour and a half, the HH-43s came in five times, evacuating nine wounded soldiers. On the sixth attempt, Pitsenbarger's Huskie was hit hard. The crew was forced to cut the hoist line and pull out for an emergency landing at the nearest strip, leaving Pitsenbarger behind. Intense enemy fire and friendly artillery called in by the Army made it impossible for the second chopper to return.

Heavy automatic weapons and mortar fire was coming in on the Army defenders from all sides while Pitsenbarger continued to care for the wounded. In case one of the Huskies made it in again, he climbed a tree to recover the Stokes litter that his pilot had jettisoned. When the commander of C Company, the unit Pitsenbarger was with, decided to move to another area, Pitsenbarger cut saplings to make stretchers for the wounded. As they started to move out, the company was attacked and overrun by a large enemy formation.

By this time, the few Army troops able to return fire were running out of ammunition. Pitsenbarger gave his pistol to a soldier who was unable to hold a rifle. With complete disregard for his own safety, Pitsenbarger scrambled around the defended area, collecting rifles and ammunition from the dead and distributing them to the men still able to fight.

It had been about two hours since the HH-43s were driven off. Pitsenbarger had done all he could to treat the wounded, prepare for a retreat to safer ground, and rearm his Army comrades. He then gathered several magazines of ammunition, lay down beside wounded Army Sgt. Fred Navarro, one of the C Company survivors who later described

Pitsenbarger's heroic actions, and began firing at the enemy. Fifteen minutes later, as an eerie darkness fell beneath the triple-canopy jungle, Pitsenbarger was hit and mortally wounded.

The next morning, when Army reinforcements reached the C Company survivors, a helicopter crew brought Pitsenbarger's body out of the jungle. Of the 180 men with whom he fought his last battle, only 14 were uninjured.

William H. Pitsenbarger was the first airman to be awarded the Air Force Cross posthumously. The Air Force Sergeants Association presents an annual award for valor in his honor.

The Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service was legendary for heroism in peace and war. No one better exemplified its motto, "That Others May Live," than Bill Pitsenbarger. He descended voluntarily into the hell of a jungle firefight with valor as his only shield—and valor was his epitaph.

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Pitsenbarger in a lighter moment during the Vietnam War. He had already gained a reputation as a pararescue jumper always willing to get into the thick of the action.