

That Others May Live

There's a simple reason why the Air Force invests so much time, money and effort molding pararescuemen into the most intensely trained warriors in the world. It's because their lives and the lives of others literally depend on it. Over the next few pages, you'll read how the "pipeline" pays off when the chips are down. In these stories, you'll discover how each rescuer embodies the spirit of the pararescueman's code: *"It is my duty as a pararescueman to save life and aid the injured. I will be prepared at all times to perform my assigned duties quickly and efficiently, placing these duties before personal desires and comforts. These things I do, that others may live."*



They Called Him 'Pits'

During a bloody Vietnam firefight, one brave airman laid down his life to save a squad of soldiers

by Master Sgt. Pat McKenna

Flying on almost 300 rescue missions in Vietnam, Airman 1st Class Bill Pitsenbarger flirted with death almost daily during the war, cheating the Grim Reaper more times than Evel Knievel. The 21-year-old Air Force pararescueman had ducked barrages of bullets and flurries of flak more times than he cared to remember while spiriting to safety downed airmen and wounded soldiers. More than a few GIs owed their very lives to the man friends called "Pits."

Despite the danger, Pitsenbarger loved the Air Force and his job, which was to save lives. His commander, Maj. Maurice Kessler, called him "One of a special breed. Alert and always ready to go on any mission." Another rescue pilot, Capt. Dale Potter, said Pits was a "young eager kid who was always ready to go, and always willing to get into the thick of the action where he could be the most useful."

Pitsenbarger's parents, William and Irene, noticed Bill had a voracious appetite for adventure at a young age. When Bill played "Follow the Leader," he'd dare his playmates to catch him as

he tiptoed around the ledges of the highest building or scrambled up the tallest tree in his neighborhood in Piqua, Ohio, a wide place in the road near Dayton.

"Nothing scared him," his father said, "not even Vietnam."

When Bill was a junior in high school, he tried to enlist in the Army as a Green Beret, but his parents refused to give their permission. Then, after he graduated from high school, an Air Force recruiter turned Pitsenbarger's ear, and on New Year's Eve 1962, the young stockboy at the local Kroger's supermarket was on a train bound for San Antonio and Air Force boot camp.

"He didn't tell us he was leaving until that night. But what can you do?" William said. "At least he knew what he wanted to do."

After completing pararescue training, which was barely four months long in the early 1960s, Bill returned home a changed man. He seemed more confident, more self-assured.

"I could tell he was different. He wasn't a kid anymore," William said. "He thought he could do anything, anytime, anywhere if he only put his mind to it. And I never really worried about what he did until he went to Vietnam. I told Bill it'd kill his mother if she found out, so I didn't tell her for the longest time."

Bill received orders in 1965 to report to Detachment 6, 38th Air Rescue and Recovery Squadron at Bien Hoa Air Base near Saigon. His unit was composed of five aircrews that flew three HH-43F Kaman Huskie helicopters, which had twin rotors that made it look

like an upside-down eggbeater.

With his unassuming and fun-loving personality, the tall, lanky lad from Ohio quickly became one of the most popular guys on base. After duty hours, Pitsenbarger didn't hole up in his hooch or drink his sorrows away in the club. Instead, he spent his spare time honing his medical skills in the 93rd MASH hospital's emergency room.

"Bill never complained and never wrote a word about the conditions, but I know it must've been miserable over there," William said. "As far as he was concerned, he was having a good time."

On March 7, 1966, Pitsenbarger's crew dusted off to rescue a South Vietnamese soldier who lost his foot in an old minefield. Nobody could figure out how to extract the wounded soldier without tripping the unstable mines. Pits piped up, saying, "No problem, just lower me down on the penetrator, I'll straddle the guy, pick him up, and then you can lift me up."

Simple, right? But everybody, including Pitsenbarger, knew the helicopter's violent propwash could trigger the mines, setting them off like tumbling dominoes, but Bill remained resolute. And he was successful. For his courage, Pitsenbarger earned the Airman's Medal that day as well as Vietnam's Medal of Military Merit and the Gallantry Cross with Bronze Palm.

"We often argued about who'd 'go in' on missions like this. All of us PJs had a strong desire to save lives ... that's what we lived for. But Bill had a triple dose of that," said now retired Chief Master Sgt. Dave Milsten, who was the ranking pararescueman in Bill's unit.

A little more than a month later, on April 11 at 3:07 p.m., the Joint Rescue Center dispatched two Huskies from Detachment 6 to extract a half-dozen or more Army casualties pinned down in a battle near Cam My, a few miles east of Saigon. Within a half-hour,

"Pedro 97," a crew of four, including then-Staff Sgt. Milsten, and "Pedro 73," with Pitsenbarger aboard, arrived on scene. Purple smoke swirled up from a sea of lush green jungle marking the extraction point. The choppers came into a hover over a hole in the triple-canopy jungle with trees reaching up to 150-feet high.

Below, a fierce firestorm raged. More than 400 battle-hardened Vietcong regulars had their teeth into less than 150 troopers from the 1st U.S. Infantry Division, Second Battalion, 16th Infantry Regiment's Charlie Company. The soldiers from the famed "Big Red One" had circled the wagons as the enemy surrounded them and blitzed them from all sides.

With no room to land, the choppers lowered their 210-foot long hoists into the thick of it to extract the wounded. The two helicopters whisked off three casualties to a field hospital at Binh Ba about 8 miles away from the fighting. While Milsten's Pedro 97 refueled on the ground, Pedro 73 returned to the battlezone.

Looking down, Pitsenbarger could see the soldiers struggling with the winch line and having trouble loading the wounded on the Stokes litter, a wire-mesh stretcher. He volunteered to go down and help, and the pilot reluctantly consented. On Pitsenbarger's descent, a chorus of crisscrossing bullets sang in the air.

First Lt. Johnny Libs, a Charlie Com-



Airman 1st Class William Pitsenbarger, standing in front of an HH-43 Huskie helicopter, gets "jocked up" for a mission in Vietnam. Known as "Pits" to friends, the airman died during a bloody firefight while trying to rescue wounded soldiers.

pany platoon leader, told his machine gunner that the "guy coming out of the helicopter from above, in an Air Force uniform, must be out of his mind to leave his not-so-safe helicopter for the inferno on the ground."

Said Libs, "We were in the fight of our lives, and I just couldn't understand why anybody would put himself in this grave danger if he didn't have to."

On the ground, Pitsenbarger treated and prepped the wounded for evacuation, and instructed others on how to load the casualties on the litter. The airman had managed to get six more soldiers to safety when Pedro 73 took a dozen .30 caliber rounds, one of which hit the fuel valve, jamming the throttle wide open. With the engine screaming on max power, the helicopter lurched out of the jungle and the pilot made a high-speed, running landing at Binh Ba.

But Pitsenbarger remained behind. With heavy mortar and small-arms fire, the helicopters couldn't return to rescue the rescuer.

"He knew the score pretty well, and he'd been fired at quite a bit before," said then Airman 1st Class Harry O'Beirne, a pararescueman born and raised in Dublin, Ireland. "He knew the chance he was taking, and it wasn't a case of going in there blindly."

The enemy had a stranglehold on Charlie Company, and slowly began tightening the noose. For the next hour and a half, Pitsenbarger attended to wounded soldiers, hacking splints out of snarled vines, building improvised stretchers out of saplings, and even

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Army 1st Lt. Martin Kroah

climbing a tree to retrieve the Stokes litter that Pedro 73 jettisoned after it was hit. Throughout this time, Pitsenbarger dodged a downpour of lead raining on the jungle.

Many of the young soldiers quickly squandered their ammo, firing wildly on full-automatic and raking shadows in the jungle. Pitsenbarger scrambled around the injured and dead, collecting their weapons and am-

munition and then redistributing them to men still able to fight. Army 1st Lt. Martin Kroah, a squad leader, said, "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 those occasions 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 been in combat in both World War II and Korea."

Another soldier, Sgt. Fred C. Navarro, a squad leader, saw Pitsenbarger take cover beside him and selectively return fire. After 15 minutes, the soldier heard his rifle go silent. Before even looking, Navarro knew the airman was dead. Of the original 134 men in Charlie Company, 106 either were

killed or wounded in action.

"It is not very often when a 'grunt' infantryman goes outside his circle to welcome an outsider, but Bill is one of us," Libs said. "I felt at the time, and still do, that Bill Pitsenbarger is one of the bravest men I have ever known."

The following morning, O'Beirne arrived to pull out the wounded and discovered a bloodbath. To reach the casualties, he had to step over his fallen countrymen. An Army captain approached him and said, "I'm sorry about your buddy. He's over there." Bill, his best friend and the guy who slept in the bunk underneath him, had been shot four times, a rifle clutched in one hand and a medical kit in the other.

"A poncho was covering Pits, and I remember getting very angry, just mad as hell," said O'Beirne, who is now a retired Army lieutenant colonel. "Then I got called out on another mission and didn't have time to grieve. But back at the unit, Bill's death was a real kick in the head. Pits' death made us realize we weren't invincible."

Although Pitsenbarger didn't escape that hellhole alive, nine other men did, thanks to the courage and devotion to duty of a 21-year-old airman, a former supermarket stockboy from Piqua, Ohio. For his bravery, the Air Force awarded Bill Pitsenbarger its second highest award — the Air Force Cross, becoming the first enlisted airman to receive the medal.

"Bill was an ordinary guy with extraordinary courage and determination," said William, his father. "I'm very proud of him. And I'd like to think if you took any PJ in the Air Force and put him in the same situation, they'd do the same thing. They're special people."

And they live by a special code, one that often demands they risk everything, pledging "These Things We Do That Others May Live." ❖