

William H. Pitsenbarger

Statement by Rep. John Boehner October 11, 2000

I support and urge my colleagues to support the Floyd D. Spence National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2001 (H.R. 4205) which contains an important provision to the friends, relatives, and military colleagues of William H. Pitsenbarger. The provision permits the Medal of Honor to be awarded posthumously to Airman First Class William H. Pitsenbarger, a pararescue crew member from Piqua, a town in my district. He was killed in a military operation assisting in the rescue of Army personnel who were severely outnumbered and surrounded by Vietcong troops near Cam My, Republic of Vietnam on April 11, 1966.

I have included a short article describing his heroic action from the Air Force Association magazine, *Valor*, published in October 1983.

'That Others May Live'

By John L. Frisbee, Contributing Editor

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 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, Detachment 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, forced to cut the hoist line, and pull out for an emergency landing at the nearest strip. 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 C Company commander, 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, he 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 is legendary for heroism in peace and war. No one better exemplifies 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.

Bill Pitsenbarger 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.

The town of Piqua still holds enormous pride for Bill Pitsenbarger and the community as well as Pitsenbarger's colleagues and friends wholeheartedly join me in supporting the award of the Medal of Honor. Pitsenbarger's heroism is well known in the Air Force. In fact, the Air Force Sergeants Association has named its award for heroism after him. More than a dozen other military and civilian buildings, organizations and monuments around the world that have been named in his honor.

I have worked with numerous organizations and individuals in researching and investigating the Pitsenbarger record. On behalf of these supporters, I submitted to Air Force Secretary Whitten Peters in March 1999 a package of materials to upgrade Pitsenbarger's award to the Medal of Honor. In the past 18 months, Pitsenbarger's file has been reviewed by Pentagon officials including the Secretary of the Air Force, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, The Deputy Secretary of Defense and the Secretary of Defense. They have recommended posthumously awarding him the Medal of Honor.

I believe this Medal of Honor is long overdue. My fellow Ohioans, Pitsenbarger's colleagues and Air Force enlisted personnel join me in the belief that this finally corrects the injustice and gives Mr. Pitsenbarger the recognition that he so deeply deserves.

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JOHN BOEHNER'S**8TH DISTRICT OF OHIO
HOME PAGE**

OCTOBER 13, 2000

[home](#) > [news and issues](#) > [weekly column index](#)**COLUMN**

That Others May Live

The House of Representatives recently passed the National Defense Authorization Act. This bill contained a provision that is important to residents of the 8th District. Unlike other parts of the bill, it did not spend money or impose a new law. Instead, it awarded the Medal of Honor to a true patriot who died in the service to his country.

This medal is a long time in coming for the people of Piqua, Ohio and the friends of William H. Pitsenbarger. Pitsenbarger was an Air Force pararescue specialist in Vietnam. Pitsenbarger was killed in a military operation assisting in the rescue of Army personnel who were severely outnumbered and surrounded by Vietcong troops near Cam My, Republic of Vietnam on April 11, 1966.

While Pitsenbarger was off duty, a call for help came into his unit. Elements of the Army's 1st Infantry Division were surrounded by enemy forces near Cam My. The only way to get the wounded out was with hoist-equipped helicopters. Pitsenbarger asked to go with one of the two helicopters on this mission. Both helicopters found an area where they could hover and lower a winch line to the surrounded troops. Pitsenbarger volunteered to go down the line and administer emergency treatment to the wounded. Pitsenbarger decided to remain with the wounded and help the Army unit fight the enemy forces.

The rest of Bill Pitsenbarger's effort is best described by a story from the Air Force Association magazine, *Valor*, published in October 1983.

WEEKLY

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Pitsenbarger's actions are well known in the Air Force. The Air Force Sergeants Association presents an annual award for valor in his honor. There are also many buildings and other tributes around the world dedicated in his memory. Awarding the Medal of Honor will finally satisfy the lengthy effort by Pitsenbarger's family, friends, military colleagues and myself to ensure that this hero is justly recognized for his deeds.

Bill Pitsenbarger put his country before his self-interest and he proved that America would remain the land of the free as long as it is the home of the brave.

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Air Force Sergeants Association

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October 12, 2000

Robert,

The following statement is provided to you to be used with your Pitsenbarger research.

In April 1998, a group approached the Air Force Sergeants Association requesting AFSA join them in an attempt to upgrade A1C William H. Pitsenbarger's posthumous Air Force Cross decoration to a Medal of Honor. SMSgt Paul Miller, a Pararescue specialist assigned to the USAF Special Operations Division, Pentagon and a member of the group, stated that he and his spouse, Msgt Sandra Miller, had performed limited research concerning Pitsenbarger for approximately two years and needed additional resources. Sergeant Miller had become interested in the possibility of an upgrade after reading an article in a 1972 *Airman* magazine issue and listening to a speech by John Levitow, a Medal of Honor recipient.

I quickly offered the services and resources of AFSA and its affiliate, the Airmen Memorial Museum and informed the group that we could do it. At the April meeting, several attendees advanced a position that weekly meetings would be required. However, these meetings were never scheduled nor conducted. Paul Miller did remain close and did provide input and assistance during the following months.

We located Hal Salam, Allison Brooks, Henry O'Beirne, David Milsten, Dale Potter, Thomas Story, Roy Boudreaux, Ronald Bachman and Raymond Murden (all USAF affiliated), and obtained statements of support for an upgrade to the Medal of Honor. Salam and Brooks were key as they were in the chain of command which is required by upgrade requirements.

Additionally, we located and secured statements of support from John Libs, Martin Kroah, Charles Navarro, David Peters, Daniel Kirby, Phillip Hall and Galen Summerlot (all U.S. Army affiliated). Their statements, along with the others satisfied the "new" information requirement in order to be considered for an upgrade. Other research was conducted and a letter was secured from MOH recipient John Levitow.

(more)

Serving Air Force Enlisted Personnel Of All Grades

In early 1999, we were ready for the package to be submitted. We approached U.S. Representative John Boehner of Ohio to forward the package to the Secretary of the Air Force (on April 29, 1999 with Boehner's letter, another requirement was met). The Secretary, via an acknowledgment letter, informed Representative Boehner that such a review may take up to two years.

The toughest challenge was getting the package out of the U.S. Air Force (extensive coordination was effected with the Air Force Review Board Agency [which is the key to upgrades, corrections of records etc.]) and, finally, I wrote General Ryan a letter requesting his support. Additionally, Hal Salam, upon my request, also contacted General Ryan. Within 24 hours, the package was returned to the Secretary of the Air Force to be released for review by the other services etc. You have the facts following that.

Robert, I'm sure not many, except possibly Paul Miller, ever knew what really occurred. Most of those that I spoke with wanted to brief military conferences, obtain senior commanders' support and call congresspersons, none of which would support the requirements.

Following e-mail transmission of the statement, I will mail you a signed copy.



JAMES D. STATON
Executive Director
Air Force Sergeants Association