

Pitsenbarger Recognition Long Overdue

AFSA's Efforts Garner Medal of Honor for Pitsenbarger

A1C William H. Pitsenbarger was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor Dec. 8, more than 34 years after he was killed in action while caring for wounded soldiers in a Vietnamese jungle during a vicious firefight.

His father, William F. Pitsenbarger, proudly accepted the award from Secretary of the Air Force F. Whitten Peters during a presentation ceremony held at the U.S. Air Force Museum at Wright-Patterson AFB, OH. Pitsenbarger is only the second enlisted member of the United States Air Force to be awarded our nation's highest military honor since the Air Force became a separate service in 1947.

"The fact that Pitsenbarger's father was able to receive the award on behalf of his son was really, really heartwarming," said retired Air Force Col Hal Salem, who was the helicopter pilot during Pitsenbarger's final mission. "It also felt great knowing that Bill Pitsenbarger finally got the award he was originally nominated for and that he deserved."

More than 1,000 people attended the ceremony making it the largest Medal of Honor ceremony ever held. Those in attendance included Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force Jim Finch, Air Force Chief of Staff General Michael Ryan, hundreds of Air Force pararescue jumpers, and survivors of the April 11, 1966 battle.

For those in attendance who witnessed Pitsenbarger's heroism

first hand – the members of Charlie Company who survived the battle – the ceremony symbolized far more than a medal presentation.

"We're getting to be damned old men, and if it wasn't for Pitsenbarger we wouldn't be here," said former Specialist Fourth Class Galen Summerlot.



Mr. William F. Pitsenbarger accepts his son's Medal of Honor from Secretary of the Air Force F. Whitten Peters. Photo by Spencer P. Lane

"It was closure. There is no doubt he deserved it from day one," said former 1st Lt John Libs. "I believe the ceremony did the Medal of Honor justice and did Pitsenbarger justice."

Pitsenbarger was posthumously awarded the Air Force Cross in 1966. This long overdue upgrade and presentation ceremo-

ny was the culmination of a two-year campaign that began with nearly a year of research by the Air Force Sergeants Association.

"I think it's long overdue. There is no doubt William Pitsenbarger deserved the Medal of Honor a long time ago. But, I also recognize that sometimes these things get stalled for whatever reason. But justice has been done by giving him the Medal of Honor," said former CMSAF Eric W. Benken "The Air Force Sergeants Association put together the package that was able to flow through the bureaucracy of the Pentagon and the Congress and ultimately to the President. The work that AFSA did on it was so good that it was overwhelmingly convincing to anyone who read the record that this case warranted the Medal of Honor. AFSA did a superb job in researching the event and in presenting the case, and that's the reason it was done."

In April 1998, researchers from AFSA and its affiliate, the Airmen Memorial Museum (AMM), went to work gathering information pertaining to Pitsenbarger. AFSA proceeded, in accordance with a 1996 law, to compile an upgrade recommendation package by gathering new information regarding the event, finding someone in the chain of command during the action to sign the recommendation and finally by asking Ohio Congressman John A. Boehner to submit the recommendation. AFSA's

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Executive Director James Staton assigned W. Parker Hayes, who at the time was Curator and Director of Operations for the AMM, to locate and gather written statements from Air Force and Army veterans who witnessed Pitsenbarger's heroic actions. This information was consolidated into a package that became the foundation of the upgrade request.

"He certainly deserved it. We just never could all get back together again to do the writing for him," said retired Army Captain Martin L. Kroah, a member of Charlie Company who was wounded during the battle and directly witnessed Pitsenbarger's bravery. "Fortunately for him, and for us, someone at AFSA was able to get us together and get us organized – without that it never would have happened."



- by William Burns