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Two linked irrevocably by death of 'Pits'

by Staff Sgt. Stuart Camp, Assistant Editor
Dec. 15, 2000

The first thing on Charlie Epperson's agenda following the Medal of Honor ceremony was to find Harry O'Bierne.

The last time they saw each other was April 2, 1966, over the body of William H. Pitsenbarger.

With a little help, the two Vietnam War veterans were reunited. Epperson was seated on a temporary platform when O'Bierne caught sight of the former soldier. Epperson, a tall man with gray flowing hair, stood and slowly closed the 20-foot gap in the crowded museum hangar. Each stuck out his hand, but the handshake was a formality before the two hugged.

Although they have talked on the phone before the ceremony, it's been 3 years since the brief encounter in the Vietnam jungle. Each quipped about how the other had changed.

Epperson was then a specialist 4 in one of the three companies needing help on April 11. He was also the one who helped Pitsenbarger out of the harness that lowered the airman from the HH-43 Huskie helicopter.

"I was only slightly wounded," Epperson said. "I lost some fingers, a piece of my arm and had shrapnel in my leg. He assigned wounded jobs — he took over."

In the next 90 minutes or so, Epperson recalled helping Pitsenbarger drag two injured soldiers out of harm's way.

"It was getting toward dark the last time I saw him (Pitsenbarger) alive. He was running off to help some guys from 3rd Platoon," he said.

Epperson, who made the trip from Paris, Mo., for the ceremony, was also

the person who led O'Bierne to the body of the fallen pararescueman the next day.

"I was the only one who knew exactly where Pits' body was," Epperson said.

O'Bierne was an airman first class pararescueman and a friend to Pitsenbarger. He was sent into the jungle to relieve Pitsenbarger and unaware he was dead. After loading three wounded troops into the helicopter, O'Bierne set out to find his friend.

Epperson explained how he took the pararescueman to the poncho-covered body.

"Then he cursed at me," Epperson said.

The tall former soldier then took off his glasses, looked away deep into the hangar and wiped away a forming tear. "I was pretty upset. I had two emotions — glad to be alive and upset."

He also lost a buddy that night.

Epperson recalled watching O'Bierne remove the gas mask still on the dead airman's face and cleaning away the dried blood.

The entire episode remains vivid in Epperson's memory, said his wife, Joyce.

"He lives it every day. He can tell you details these other guys have forgotten," she said.

Epperson suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder, unable to shake the memories of the battle and aftermath from April 1966.

"I'm hoping this will help the healing," she said. "He told me last night we weren't staying, but I made him. It's a big step."

Epperson was one of the half-dozen or so soldiers who survived the April 11 firefight who attended the Medal of Honor ceremony. Almost to a man, they had written letters and statements to help make the Medal of Honor possible.

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Father accepts Medal of Honor for only child; more than 1,000 attend event

by Staff Sgt. Stuart Camp, Assistant Editor
 Dec. 15, 2000

The family of Airman 1st Class William H. Pitsenbarger was presented the Medal of Honor Dec. 8 in the Air Force Museum.

"Amid the gloom and waste of war, we see, occasionally, a brief but brilliant flash of personal valor — of heroism so radiant that it lights up everything and everyone near it," said Secretary of the Air Force F. Whitten Peters. "Even more occasionally, we see one of those flashes so sustained that it outlasts the dark night of war and is visible to us even in the brilliant sunshine of peace. Such is the heroism of Airman 1st Class William H. Pitsenbarger."

The Air Force secretary's words echoed in the Air Force Museum's modern flight hangar as the Medal of Honor was posthumously awarded to Pitsenbarger. Peters presented the medal to William F. "Frank" Pitsenbarger, the airman's 83-year-old father. He accepted the nation's highest military honor on behalf of his only child.

Pitsenbarger's Medal of Honor will be displayed at the pararescue training unit, Detachment 1, 342nd Training Squadron at Kirtland AFB, N.M.



Air Force photo by Spencer P. Lane

F. Whitten Peters, Secretary of the Air Force, presents the Medal of Honor to the father of Airman 1st Class William H. Pitsenbarger in the modern flight gallery of the Air Force Museum Dec. 8. Senior Airman Wendy R. Harvey of the Air Force Band of Flight here (left) was the official medal bearer for the ceremony.



Air Force photo by Spencer P. Lane

The ceremony was 34 years after the airman's death in the jungle of Vietnam.

"It came as no surprise to anyone who knew him that Bill Pitsenbarger chose to descend from the relative safety of his helicopter into the midst of a mounting firefight," Peters said. "And, in his last great act of valor, Bill Pitsenbarger had at least six opportunities to save himself — to return to safety. But each time, he chose instead to stay and help people who desperately needed his assistance."

Senior Master Sgt. Paul K. Koester of the 102nd Rescue Squadron sits with fellow pararescuemen during the Medal of Honor ceremony. Present and past pararescuemen came from around the world to celebrate the heroics of Pitsenbarger.

Some of the men who benefited from Pitsenbarger's gallantry were part of the standing-room-only crowd who attended the ceremony. About eight survivors of the April 11, 1966, battle came to honor the 21-year-old airman who died while treating their wounded and defending their position.

"While the presentation of this medal will not fill the loss felt by his family and friends, it will forever serve as a reminder to us all of 'his' valor and of the great courage displayed by members of the pararescue community," said Chief Master Sgt. of the Air Force Frederick J. Finch.

A large portion of the crowd was fellow pararescuemen, also known as pararescuemen, also known as PJs, wearing their maroon berets. There were active duty, Air National Guard and former pararescuemen there. Some came because they trained Pitsenbarger, befriended him, or know him as an icon in the pararescue career field.

"This is like an odyssey for everyone involved," said retired Tech. Sgt. Bill Preble, from Tucson, Ariz. "We all wanted to be like him, but we'll never know if we were. Pitsenbarger was the pinnacle of our profession."

Staff Sgt. Patrick Harding, an 11-year pararescueman who is currently assigned to the 320th Special Tactics Squadron, made the long trip from Okinawa for the one-day event.

"I came just to see a brother PJ get honored for something he deserved," he said. "I definitely wanted to be here. It's an event of a lifetime."

Some retired pararescuemen proudly wore their days-gone-by service dress uniforms.

"Our pararescuemen were, and are, confident and brave, and exemplify the refrain, 'that others may live,'" said Gen. Michael E. Ryan, Air Force chief of staff. "Bill Pitsenbarger was just such an airman ready to do his duty 'that others may live.' And what makes this award of the Medal of Honor even more poignant, is the recognition that his actions were primarily in support of embattled American soldiers."

Ron Haley, one of the survivors, said he cried so much in the ceremony, "I darn near passed out."

When asked after the ceremony about his emotions, retired Lt. Col. Harold Salem, from Mesa, Ariz., the pilot of the helicopter Pitsenbarger flew on, said: "Relieved in a sense. We put him in for the Medal of Honor, but it was downgraded. When the president approved it Oct. 3, I was thrilled to death. It (this effort) was not for myself, it was for Mr. Pitsenbarger — while he's still alive to receive the medal he should have gotten many years ago."

In a Pentagon ceremony Sept. 22, 1966, Air Force Chief of Staff John P. McConnell presented the Air Force Cross to Pitsenbarger's mother and father.

"This gives a sense of closure, Salem said. "There has always been something missing. When it comes to feelings, it's hard to explain."

The ceremony culminated many years of effort by Salem, survivors, friends, and John Levitow. Levitow, the Air Force's only other enlisted Medal of Honor recipient, died Nov. 8.

Following the formal ceremony, news reporters interviewed Frank Pitsenbarger but people lined up for the chance to meet him.

While he waited, Tech. Sgt. Jon Rosa, 123rd STS of the Kentucky Air National Guard, put his feelings into a few simple words as an unofficial spokesman for the group of pararescuemen. "We all have the same response — it's about time."

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William Pitsenbarger was presented with a Medal of Honor for his son, Airman 1st Class William H. Pitsenbarger, during a ceremony at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton, Ohio. (Al Behrman/AP Photo)

Service Rewarded

Father Accepts Medal of Honor for Son Who Died in Vietnam

By John McWethy
abc NEWS.com

Dec. 8 — Today, people came from miles away to honor Bill Pitsenbarger, a man who was only 21 when he died in Vietnam.

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Harold O'Beirne, his best friend in Vietnam, was there.

"He was just a fairly regular individual who did extraordinary things," says O'Beirne. So was Harold Salem, the helicopter pilot he flew with in the war.

"He's a person that's always moving, keeps things light, really quick witted," says Salem.

And so were men he saved who had never seen him before, like Fred Navarro.

"It was like we had known each other for a long time. It was just the way he carried himself," says Navarro.

An Extraordinary Mission

Pitsenbarger was what the Air Force calls a PJ: a para-rescue jumper trained as a medic and a commando. After only eight months in Vietnam, he had already been on 250 rescue missions, nearly all of them under fire.

His most extraordinary mission was on April 11, 1966, when 180 American soldiers on patrol 45 miles from Saigon stumbled upon a Vietcong stronghold. The Americans were quickly surrounded in the dense jungle, and they fought through the afternoon and night, suffering heavy casualties. Air Force helicopters were sent to rescue the wounded, but they were unable to land in the dense jungle. So they hovered over the battle area, trying to evacuate the wounded by lowering wire stretchers through the trees.

But the wire stretchers kept getting caught in the trees, so Pitsenbarger, aboard one chopper, said he could speed things up if he went on the ground.

"The final question to him was, Pits, it's hotter than hell down there," says Salem.

"Do you still want to go down?" [Pitsenbarger replied] Yes, sir, captain, I can do some good."

Soldiers were stunned to see Pitsenbarger being lowered through the trees.

"I couldn't believe that anybody was brave enough or crazy enough to come down on the ground with all this firing going on," says Navarro. "Even though there was 700 guns firing at the same time, it was to him like nothing was going on. Like nothing could hurt him. He came there to save lives and that's what he was doing."

Then, Navarro was badly wounded.

"I couldn't fight anymore...Pitsenbarger covered my body with two dead American

soldiers," says Navarro. "I believe he did it so that I wouldn't be hit anymore. If it hadn't been for Pitsenbarger, I wouldn't be talking to you now."

Soon after, Pitsenbarger himself was hit.

"He kept on working even after he had been shot...pulling in wounded and taking care of them," recalls O'Beirne.

Receiving the Medal

The Army patrol suffered 80 percent casualties that day; 48 died and 111 were wounded. It was one of the deadliest battles of the war. Pitsenbarger died that day too.

"He must have saved 40, 50, 60 guys that are living today," says Navarro.

In a ceremony today, Pitsenbarger's father accepted the Congressional Medal of Honor at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton, Ohio, on behalf of his only child.

"In a sense, this is one more mission for Bill Pitsenbarger," Air Force Secretary F. Whitten Peters said during the ceremony. ■



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