

AIR FORCE CROSS

Posthumous Award For Heroic Airman

S&S Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — The Air Force's second highest decoration, the Air Force Cross, has been awarded posthumously to A1C William H. Pitsenbarger for heroism in Vietnam.

The award was presented by Air Force Chief of Staff General John P. McConnell to the airman's parents, Mr. and Mrs. William Pitsenbarger, in a Pentagon ceremony.

McConnell also announced that Airman Pitsenbarger had earned the Airman's Medal, four Air Medals and the Purple Heart for other heroism and meritorious achievements while in Vietnam.

The 21-year-old airman was assigned as a pararescueman with Det. 6, 38th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Sq., Bien Hoa AB, Republic of Vietnam.

He was killed by Viet Cong forces April 11 in a jungle fight near Bien Hoa.

The citation accompanying the Air Force Cross stated, "His bravery and determination in the face of overwhelming odds are in keeping with the highest standards of performance and traditions of the American fighting man under attack. The extraordinary heroism and aggressiveness of Airman Pitsenbarger reflect the highest credit upon himself and the United States Air Force."

McConnell noted the Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service's motto, "That Others May Live," in telling Pitsenbarger's parents that the men with whom their son lived and flew "are famous for their courage."

Pitsenbarger completed Army paratrooper training, Navy underwater swimmers' school and Air Force rescue and survival training after his enlistment in the Air Force Dec. 31, 1962.



PITSENBARGER

Pitsenbarger Volunteered



A1C William H. Pitsenbarger

Edwin J. Kosier's article "The Air Force Cross" in your March issue brought back some very extraordinary memories.

As a combat news reporter doing radio interviews in Vietnam from December 1965 to November 1966, I did the pleasure of interviewing C William H. Pitsenbarger shortly after he had rescued a Vietnamese private from a mine field at Bien Hoa. The private had been ordered by the Vietnamese base commander into the mine field to put out grass fire. While inside the mine field he froze when a mine near him exploded. It wasn't certain if he had opened the mine or if the fire had made it go off. Anyway, although not sure, he could not, or would not, leave even when ordered to do so or when shot by the Vietnamese base commander.

Pitsenbarger volunteered, was ordered into the mine field, and rescued the private. I can still see that handsome young man (he must have been only about 18) as he told me the story of the rescue. He was embar-

rassed that someone thought he was important enough to be interviewed and considered a hero.

Later it was my unpleasant privilege to interview the HH-3E pilot that was forced to leave Airman Pitsenbarger on the ground the day he was killed. This pilot, an Air Force captain, with tears unashamedly streaming down his face, told me how he had ordered Pitsenbarger to come back up the hoist to the helicopter, but that William had told him, "No sir, they need me down here. You better leave while you still can."

The next day the commander of the Air Rescue Squadron at Bien Hoa flew me to the 93rd Evacuation Hospital at Long Binh to interview the Army platoon sergeant, who had been in charge of the platoon that Pitsenbarger had been helping when he gave his life. The sergeant, although severely wounded, told how they had been ambushed and pinned down, how Airman Pitsenbarger had treated the wounded, passed out rifles and ammunition, and repeat-

edly exposed himself to enemy fire to assist those who needed him. And even after he was wounded, William continued to help the others until he was no longer able to walk or crawl. Even then he was not thinking of himself, but offering words of encouragement to the soldiers to keep defending themselves and not to give up.

We flew to Tan Son Nhut and gave the audio tapes to the commander of Air Rescue Operations for Vietnam. I regret that I cannot remember this colonel's name, or the major who was Pitsenbarger's commander, but we were confident that Airman Pitsenbarger would be awarded the Medal of Honor. I cannot answer for the others who knew William and the sacrifice he had made, but personally I felt he had been betrayed when he was given the Air Force Cross (and it is not my purpose to downgrade this high award) instead of the Medal of Honor. He should have been awarded both. He most certainly earned both.

The temptation to write President Nixon concerning this injustice was great, and I started to write him a number of times, but a lack of courage stopped me from finishing and mailing the letters. I can still feel the frustration and disappointment that I felt at that time as I relive the memories renewed by Kosier's article. I felt then, and I still feel, that Airman Pitsenbarger deserved the Medal of Honor. Not that he sought it, but by doing his duty as he saw it. I ask you, "What greater sacrifice can a person make than to lay down his or her life for another?"

I am still hopeful that someday someone with the courage and power to do so will correct this injustice and award A1C William H. Pitsenbarger that which he earned and so richly deserves—The Air Force Medal of Honor.

Ronald E. Sears, (MSGT-Ret.)
Valdosta, GA

Comment: AFSA's highest annual award is the William H. Pitsenbarger Award for Heroism, named after A1C Pitsenbarger.

Training, mutual respect crucial to Al

BY TECH. SGT. WILLIAM M RHODES
377TH ABW PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Levitow reflects on events surrounding medal; Shares candid feelings on A1C Pitsenbarger

For this grounded Air Force crew member in 1969, life wasn't particularly fun. When you're flying over the jungles of South Vietnam, no mission was routine. At any minute the skies could erupt into segments of hell. With a little more than a year left in the Air Force, this Airman First Class (E-4) was nursing wounds from such a mission when the ringing of the telephone broke into his world of solitude.

Thirty minutes after the first phone call, his squadron commander approached him, abruptly asking if he just hung up on a colonel. It was at this moment when John L. Levitow learned the truth about his future.

On Feb. 24 that same year, Levitow was serving as loadmaster when his aircraft was severely damaged by 82mm mortar fire over Long Binh. Suffering from more than 40 shrapnel wounds in his back and legs, he observed a mag-

nesium flare, thrown by the mortar blast, amid a jumble of spilled ammunition canisters. Despite loss of blood and partial loss of feeling in his right leg, he threw himself on the deadly device, hugged it close, dragged himself to the open cargo door, and hurled the flare through it. The flare ignited in the air in almost the same instant. His selfless act saved the crew and aircraft from almost certain death and destruction.

Because of his heroic efforts, he became the lowest ranking airman in history to earn the Medal of Honor.

"I hung up on the colonel twice. At the time I didn't think he was funny. I thought he was lying, that he thought it was all a joke," Levitow said.

Originally put in for the Air Force Cross, the caller from 7th Air Force headquarters, was trying to inform him that the medal (Air Force



A1C Levitow at time of receiving Medal of Honor

Cross) had fallen through.

According to Levitow his response was "win some, lose some."

"Hey, I'm a first-term airman, I could have cared less." And then, all of a sudden, he said it's been upgraded. I knew what that meant, I said, 'I don't think this is funny,' and hung up on him. A couple of minutes later the same guy called and I did the exactly

same thing. I hung up a second time. I didn't think it was true until my commander confirmed it," Levitow explained.

After his departure from Vietnam, the future Medal of Honor recipient went on to Norton Air Force Base, Calif., where he continued flying in C-141s until his discharge from the Air Force.

After 30 days he received another phone call, this time from the Department of the Air Force, requesting his presence in Washington. "For about a week and a half before the flight, I didn't know what I was going to Washington for," Levitow said.

"The Medal of Honor can be downgraded at any stage. Although it had gone in at the medal, it could have been coming down for the Air Force Cross," he explained. "Until I read the actual citation, I didn't even know what I did."

"Instinctively, I knew I had wounded myself being one of the ones helping the gunner, ward and I heard the pilot. 'What happened, did a flare off?' The last thing I remember is we were getting ready to drop a flare, I looked around and it was that problem. A started moving. From that moment on, I don't remember anything until we're touched down and I'm throwing ammo cans between the guns of airplane, because I was afraid we were going to do gro loops and I didn't want 2 pound ammo cans fly around killing people. I don't remember these things."

"I felt awkward, did I really deserve it? Until you're standing there and having President of the United States pin something around your neck, then you're in shock, really doesn't become a reality until shortly afterward," Levitow said.

Following the medal ceremony, Levitow was asked by the Air Force if he wanted to return to service. He turned

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mony, Levitow was asked by
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return to service. He turned it
down for civilian life, a deci-
sion he says he doesn't regret.

Currently, the director of
planning for the Department
of Veterans Affairs in
Connecticut, Levitow stills
visits many Air Force bases
for various functions.
Because he is the only enlisted
Medal of Honor recipient,
Levitow says he and the Air
Force had to come to a mutual
understanding of how these
trips worked out.

One of the things Levitow
notices on these trips is the
breakdown of the barrier
between the officer and enlist-
ed ranks. "There's a better
respect for one another. That
respect has made the Air Force
the key service to be in," he
stated.

Training is another topic
he frequently discusses with
younger airman. "The Air
Force wants an educated per-
son. If you don't want to con-
tinue your education, you'd
might as well get out."

"It's just a matter of utiliz-
ing all the training you can
get. You never know when
you're going to need it. And I
can justify the fact that I'm
here today because I was for-
tunate enough to be trained
properly," Levitow said.

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LEVITOW FROM PAGE 16

approached Levitow with the idea of naming an award in his honor. Levitow said he thought it was for a "one-time use only." Little did he know that his name would become the most recognized name in the Air Force associated with the Medal of Honor.

He credits the Air Force Sergeants' Association for helping him adapt to the pressures of being an E-4 with the Medal of Honor.

Levitow is one of 14 living recipients who belong to the Medal of Honor Society, based in Parkers Point, South Carolina.

Medals are recipients from World War II, Korea and the Vietnam War. The latter three comprise the majority because of the age factor of

living members. In 1970, when Levitow received his medal, there were 440 living recipients.

"Ultimately, I belong to the Last Man's Club. We don't expect anymore (medals of honor) because of the issue of combat. And I don't believe there is a recipient walking in this country that wants another one issued," Levitow said.

On April 11, 1966, 21-year-old A1C William H. Pittsberger of Fiqua, Ohio, was killed while defending some of his wounded comrades. For his bravery and sacrifice, he was posthumously awarded the nation's second highest military decoration, the Air Force Cross.

Pittsberger was known to his friends as "Toady," his 300th combat mission on that fateful day when some men of

the U.S. Army's 1st Division were ambushed and pinned down in an area about 45 miles east of Saigon.

Two HH-43 "Huskies" helicopters of the USAF's 38th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron were rushed to the scene to lift out the wounded. Pitts was a paratrooper (P) on one of them.

Upon reaching the site of the ambush, Pitts was lowered through the trees to the ground, where he attended to the wounded before having them lifted to the helicopter by cable.

After the wounded men had been flown to an aid station, the two USAF helicopters returned for their second load.

As one of them lowered its

litter basket to Pittsberger, who had remained on the ground with the 20 infantry men still alive, it was hit by a burst of enemy small-arms fire.

When its engine began to lose power, the pilot realized he had to get the Husky away from the area as soon as possible. Instead of climbing into the litter basket so he could leave with the helicopter, Pitts elected to remain with the Army troops under enemy attack and he gave a wave to the helicopter, which flew away to safety.

Pittsberger continued to treat the wounded and, when the others began running low on ammunition, he gathered ammo from the dead and distributed them. For those still alive, he joined the others with a rifle to hold off the Viet Cong.

About 7:30 that evening, Bill Pittsberger was killed. A Viet Cong sniper's bullet hit his body. When recovered the next day, one hand still held a rifle and the other a medical kit.

Levitow said, "I believe I should be the medal recipient."

Pittsberger should be the first. Now here's a P1 that gave his life. He did more in my estimation than what minor line accomplishment that I had, but I was alive.

Now I don't want to say its politics, that's wrong. I'm just saying for the Air Force, they may have capitalized on the fact that I was alive versus deceased. I think I would love for the Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force or somebody to turn around and open it up and I'd be glad to be number two."

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Kirtland takes Holloman in Tip-off Classic

The Kirtland Flyers Men's All-Star Basketball team opened its 96-97 season with a bang by taking all four games to win the Holloman Air Force Base basketball Tip Off Classic Oct. 4-5.

The Flyers played three games the first day. The team defeated William Beaumont, El Paso, 107-80, the Alamogordo

demolished Fort Bliss 115-80 for the championship.

Team captain Matt Wireman lead all scoring for the Flyers averaging 25 points per game. Coming off the bench guard Harris Brown added 15 points per game. The team defeated William Beaumont, El Paso, 107-80, the Alamogordo