



Chapter 1

“That Others May Live”

Code of the Air Rescueman

**“It is my duty, as a member of the Air Rescue Service,
to save life and to 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.”**

Bien Hoa AB, Vietnam
Wednesday, 13 April 1966

“Dear Van,

Am circumventing policy tonight. I'm sending you the enclosed without going through channels. Like most of us who even casually knew this pararescueman, I was very impressed by him and would like to see him get all the posthumous eulogies he deserves.” So began a letter from the Bien Hoa AB public affairs officer to the ARRS historian at HQ ARRS, Orlando AFB Florida. He could not have known that 25 years after the Vietnam War ended, Airman First Class William Hart Pitsenbarger would be awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for his heroism on 11 April 1966.

A1C Bill Pitsenbarger was a 21-year old Pararescueman. In late 1965, he volunteered to go to Vietnam. Bill was assigned to Det 6, 38 ARRS at Bien Hoa AB. He arrived in Vietnam on 8 August 1965 and was in the final stretch of his enlistment in the Air Force. Det 6 was responsible for two basic types of missions: rescue of pilots who bailed out of their airplanes and evacuation of wounded soldiers from the battlefield. On 17 September 1965, at 9 p.m., Airman Pitsenbarger scrambled, in an HH-43F helicopter nicknamed Pedro, on his first combat mission. A Vietnamese Air Force H-34 helicopter had been shot down ten miles west of Bien Hoa AB. An HU-16, a C-123 flareship, two A-1s and two UH-1 gunships were orbiting overhead. They were taking small arms fire from the vicinity of the downed H-34. Captain Cook, the Pedro pilot, informed the crew they were going in for a closer view. Under the light of the flares, they could see the wreckage which was 90% burned and indistinguishable as a helicopter. Suddenly, a man wearing a flight suit ran out of the trees and started waving his arms. *“Pitsenbarger, we’re going to land and pick this guy up. Keep him covered with your rifle. I think he’s a good guy, but be ready for anything!”* Captain Cook landed

his Pedro and signaled for the man to come to the helicopter. The survivor appeared to be unarmed. As he entered the Pedro, Bill kept him covered while the helicopter mechanic (HM), TSgt Domenick Cocuzzi, frisked him and confirmed he was unarmed. A quick takeoff was accomplished. The survivor, Lt Cao Van, was badly burned and going into shock. Bill began medical treatment and told Captain Cook to hustle to the nearest hospital. The weather deteriorated and forced the crew to fly at 300-feet above the ground all the way back to Bien Hoa AB. It was an exciting way to begin a tour in Vietnam.¹

Seven days later, Bill scrambled on a downed F-100. With two UH-1 helicopter gunships for rescue escort (rescort), the Pedro headed to the rescue. Its crew [Captain Carl Layman (Pilot), Captain Dale Potter (Copilot), TSgt Joe Blaquiere (HM) and Bill] was directed to a parachute entangled in a group of 20-foot high trees. They pulled into a hover and hoisted Major Martin Barbena into their chopper.²

On 8 March 1966, Bill was flying with a crew that had scrambled to rescue a wounded South Vietnamese soldier who had, inadvertently, walked into a minefield.

Because the man had lost a foot, no one wanted to walk into the minefield to help him. It was hoped that the Rescuemen could hoist him out. Orbiting overhead, the crew discussed how to accomplish this rescue. Their concerns included the possibility that the rotor wash might set off additional mines, that the wounded soldier might set off other mines while trying to get on the penetrator and that the soldier might have no idea as to how to use the penetrator. Without being asked, Bill volunteered. He told his pilot, *“Lower me down on the penetrator and I’ll get the guy. Then you can pick us both up at the same time.”* Bill was lowered, snatched the wounded soldier and brought him back up to the safety of the helicopter. On the way to the hospital he treated the soldier’s injuries. Bill did not consider his actions unusual. Time and time again, PJs all over Vietnam were inserted by hoist to save lives. However, the choice to “go down” was always a voluntary call made by the PJ. When the mission called for such acts of individual bravery, there was never a shortage of volunteers. For his selfless act of heroism, Bill was awarded the Airman’s Medal.³

On 14 March 1966, Bill scrambled on a O-1F “Bird Dog” down in “Indian Country”

30 miles east of Bien Hoa AB. A second O-1F orbiting overhead spotted a pen gun flare but could find the survivor because of dense jungle. The downed pilot was reported to not have a survival radio.



USAF Museum Photo

Airman Pitsenbarger being awarded a medal for one of the many rescue missions he flew in Vietnam. Photo taken at Det 6, 38 ARRS Bien Hoa AB, RVN. PJs did not wear maroon berets until 26 May 1966. Photo was taken before distribution of berets was accomplished.

Captain Ronald Bachman was the pilot of Pedro Low. He and his copilot, Captain Harold Salem, discussed the situation with their PJ Bill Pitsenbarger. When a second pen gun flare came out of the jungle, they all agreed that sending a PJ down to the ground was the only way they were going to find this guy. Helicopter Mechanic (HM) TSgt Richard Canon ran the hoist and lowered “Pits” down to the ground. Bill Pitsenbarger hollered out for the downed pilot. This was

not a very tactical way to conduct a combat Search and Rescue (SAR), but it worked. First Lieutenant Schneider, the downed O-1 pilot, heard Bill hollering and he began to run towards the sound. Bill heard someone crashing through the jungle, heading directly at him.



Photo courtesy of William Pitsenbarger and Flesh Public Library
Piqua Ohio

A1C William H. Pitsenbarger in front of an HH-43F at Bien Hoa Air Base (AB), Republic of Vietnam (RVN), 1966. Bill's gear includes flack vest, camouflage survival vest, web belt with .38 pistol and helicopter helmet. He was nicknamed "Pits" by his teammates in Vietnam.

He covered the area with his M-16 and was glad to see an American appear. Concerned that "bad guys" might also be converging on to the scene, Bill decided it was time to leave. The penetrator came back down and both the survivor and the PJ rode it up together. Back in the HH-43, the rescuers learned that another American was trapped in the crashed O-1; Pitsenbarger would need help on this recovery. A1C Henry O'Beirne, the PJ on the high bird joined him. When they reached the crash, they found the observer dead. Even with two PJs, the body could not be removed from the wreckage. Both PJs returned to their Pedro and requested additional help. They obtained this help from a nearby Special Forces camp. Returning to the crash site, the PJs and soldiers were lowered into the jungle, some took up defensive positions while the others removed the deceased from the plane. Finally, the job was done and everyone returned to base.⁴

Within an hour of returning to Bien Hoa AB, Captain Bachman's crew scrambled on a medical evacuation (medevac). Accompanied by a high bird commanded by Captain Raymond Murden, they headed off to pick up some wounded troops. The two crews rescued six wounded

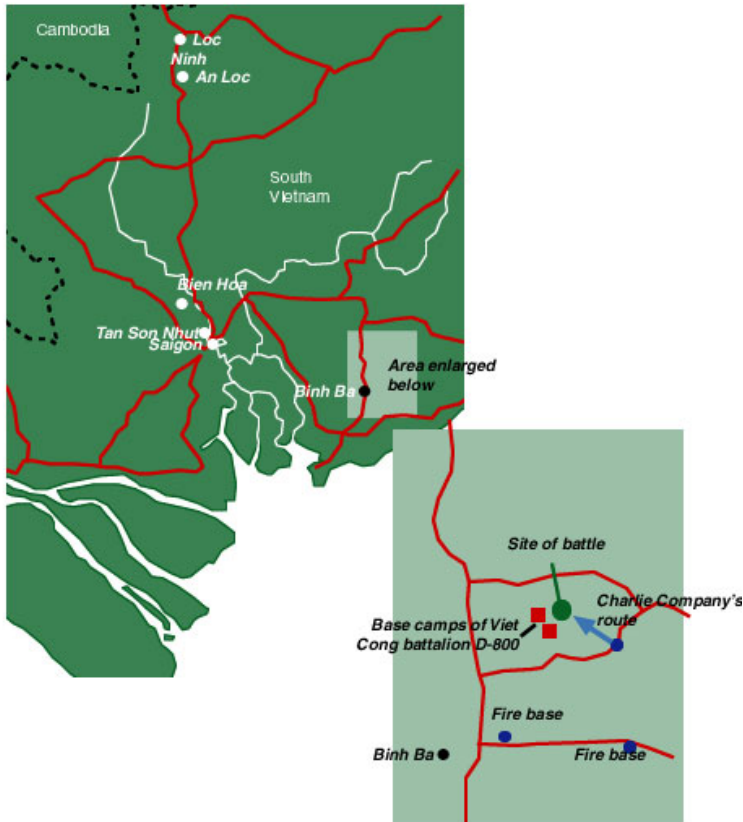
soldiers and a sentry dog. Later, Bill Pitsenbarger said “*We were really surprised when we saw a dog coming up the hoist with a wounded soldier.*” It was an interesting way to end the day.⁵

Bill Pitsenbarger’s tour in Vietnam was full of missions. In his 275 days in Vietnam, he had logged over 300 sorties in the HH-43F. Many of these sorties came under fire. “Pits”, as he was known to his friends, was making plans to return home to Piqua, Ohio. He had already applied to Arizona State University where he planned to study to become a nurse. In four months his tour would be over. Bill Pitsenbarger was ready to go home. He recognized that he and his teammates had been hanging their asses out with increasing frequency. The last few months had seen a dramatic rise in troops in contact (TIC) medevacs. These missions were becoming increasingly risky. Lately, the troops requesting medevac were in close contact with the enemy. Hovering a helicopter over a battle in progress took a great deal of courage and nerves of steel.

There was a reason for the increase in medevac requests. The senior leadership of the U.S. Army in Vietnam had changed objectives and tactics. Up until this time, the

United States had supported the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). That support consisted of organizing, training, and equipping them in the hope that they would then defeat the Viet Cong (VC). The reality was that the ARVN was not living up to our expectations. U.S. commanders were under pressure to quickly end this conflict. They had come to the conclusion that the ARVN was not capable of defeating the VC, not without the direct support and inspiration of U.S. ground troops. Throughout 1965 and early 1966, U.S. Army troop strength steadily increased. By March 1966, the number of Americans in country had grown to over 250,000 men. At this time, U.S. Army commanders believed they had the assets required to demonstrate how to defeat the VC. They hoped that when the ARVN saw the Americans victorious in battle, the South Vietnamese troops would emulate the U.S. soldiers. Part of this demonstration was codenamed “Operation Abilene.”





Map of South Vietnam depicting the region in which Operation Abilene occurred⁶.

The concept of this operation was simple. Company sized units of U.S. troops would be sent into the jungle to locate the VC. American artillery fire bases were positioned so that they could provide support to these troops. Helicopter gunships and United States Air Force (USAF) fighters were "on call." As VC and U.S. troops engaged in combat, the Americans would be

reinforced quickly by helicopter. Overwhelming troop strength and firepower would assure victory. Unfortunately for our side, the VC were not standing their ground. When U.S. troops engaged the VC, a brief firefight ensued, followed by the disappearance of the into the jungle. These battles were indecisive and usually resulted in American casualties. We were showing

little progress and U.S. casualties continued to mount. Our commanders sought a plan to overcome the VC's unwillingness to fight in massed units. In early April 1966, intelligence troops discovered a battalion sized (400 soldiers) VC force in the jungle, 40-miles east-southeast of Bien Hoa AB. This was exactly the type of unit our commanders wanted to engage. What they needed now was some way to get them to fight. They needed to bait their trap.

Charlie Company, 2nd Battalion, 1st Infantry Division, U.S. Army would be the bait. Captain William Nolan commanded Charlie Company. After receiving his orders, he informed his platoon leaders of their mission. Third Platoon, with 35 men, was led by Lt Martin Kroah. Sgt Fred Navarro was one of his squad leaders. Operation Abilene would kick off on Easter Sunday, 10 April 1966. The jump off point would be a road named Route 327 (see map). Third Platoon would take point, followed up by 1st, 2nd and 4th Platoons. Charlie Company was a motivated group of soldiers. They knew that the VC were out there and that contact was likely. These men strongly believed in their leaders' plans and were more than willing to go out and "kick some VC ass."

At 7:30 a.m., they left the road and headed north-northwest into the jungle. A short time later all of Charlie Company was in trail. A soldier pushing through dense jungle undergrowth frequently loses sight of the man in front of him. Vietnam's triple canopy jungle, brush, vines and trees all combined to block visual contact between soldiers. This problem was even more aggravated between platoons. A rifle company in the jungle is similar to four separate armies, connected primarily by their radios. One key to survival is not to get so far apart that you cannot support each other. At 12:15 p.m., 3rd Platoon's pointman fired at two VC but missed them. Suddenly, another VC appeared and then disappeared into the jungle. Fourth Platoon, the rear guard of Charlie Company was also making sporadic contacts with the enemy. At 12:50 p.m., the VC opened up on the 4th, killing one soldier and wounding another. Captain Nolan radioed all platoons to set up a defensive perimeter around the killed in action (KIA) and wounded in action (WIA). As each platoon moved to comply, it came under fire. Charlie Company formed up into a circle to cover themselves with interlocking rifle fire.

Numerous enemy soldiers were now being spotted in all quadrants. It was time to radio for artillery. At 2:30 p.m., Lt Kroah radioed in a call for fire. After the ranging rounds hit the right patch of jungle, he radioed, “*Fire for effect!*” A total of 10 rounds of 105mm were on the way. The Americans heard the “whoosh” of incoming artillery and then the explosions. Lt Kroah heard screams from his own men who were being hit by friendly off target artillery. When the artillery stopped, the VC began firing on Charlie Company. The Americans were surrounded and under heavy sniper attacks. Then enemy mortar rounds began to fall on the American positions and several more men were wounded. The wounded men’s only hope of surviving was a medevac. Captain Nolan radioed a request for an emergency medevac making it clear that his troops were in contact and the area was hot!⁷ Because of the triple canopy jungle, a hoist equipped helicopter was needed. The nearest clearing was four kilometers away. Charlie Company had been drawn into a carefully crafted ambush.

SSgt David Milsten was the non-commissioned officer in charge (NCOIC) of the PJ Section at Bien Hoa AB. On that day, he was on primary HH-43 alert. His after

action report provides these details: “*The mission began around 3 p.m. My bird (Pedro 97) was on primary and Pits was on backup in Pedro 73. A company of 1st Division troops had been hit by snipers and friendly artillery fire. They had 10 critical and 15 ambulatory wounded and were in heavy jungle with 175-200 foot trees. Our birds are the only ones in this area with hoists, so we were sent out to get them. My bird went in for the first load. We made one Stokes litter pickup and then moved away to allow the backup bird to go in. While they accomplished a second Stokes litter pickup, I transferred the guy we had to a folding pole litter. We then went back in for a second hoist pickup. Two litter patients made a full load for us. At 3:45 p.m., both HH-43s headed for a small mobile army surgical hospital (MASH) at Binh Ba, about 10 miles to the south. While we unloaded our patients, we discussed sending down both PJs with chain saws, to cut out an area big enough to land in. Past experience has also shown that the loading process is much faster with a PJ on the ground. My bird needed to refuel, so around 4:15 p.m., Pits and his crew on Pedro 73 headed back alone.*”⁸

Captain Harold Salem was the pilot on Pedro 73 with Maj Maurice Kessler as his copilot. He and his crew headed back to “C” Company. In the cabin, A1C Gerald Hammond (HM) and A1C Bill Pitsenbarger (PJ) were discussing the last pickup with their pilots. The first pickups had been complicated by the Army troops lack of training in the use of the Stokes litter. This had resulted in a very long hover time during which the HH-43 was an easy target to enemy fire. Bill Pitsenbarger told Capt Salem he had a solution. *“Captain, put me down on the ground. Once I’m down there, I can really help out. I can show those guys how to rig the Stokes litter and load it right. Its a wonder we didn’t drop that last guy. The troops who loaded him into the litter didn’t even strap him in! A couple of times, when the Stokes popped lose after it snagged in the trees, I thought we would lose him for sure. Thank God we didn’t! If you’ll put me on the ground, I can get everything organized. In between pickups, I can help some of the wounded and decide who needs to come out first. Maybe we can send some up on the penetrator. It will be much faster and you can put more people in the bird. I know we ca do it! It will make a real difference!”* Captain Salem contemplated this option. He did not like it. Hal replied to

Bill: *“Pits you have a point, but I don’t want to take a chance of losing you. You are really needed here. With you gone, it limits us to one litter pickup at a time. It is really a “hot” spot down there. Are you really sure you want to down?”* Bill said, *“Yes sir! Captain, I can really make a difference.”* Salem then asked his HM. *“Hammond, what do you think? Can you make it alone back there?”* *“Yes sir, I agree with Pits. Something has to be done. That last pickup was a bitch. I thought we were going to lose that last guy in the Stokes litter. Those guys on the ground have probably never even seen any of our rescue gear and do not know any of our procedures. Pits could really help, even though I really do not want to see Pits go down there.”* Captain Salem thought it over. He had a bad feeling about this but knew that Pitsenbarger was right. *“OK Pits, I’ll go along with you. Let’s give it a try. I’ll put you down, but remember these orders: First, as soon as you show the troops how to load the litter and brief them on our procedures, I want you back up here. Second, if I signal you to come back up – you come up. Pits, any second thoughts?”* *“No sir. I’m ready when you are.”*⁹

Charlie Company’s radio operator informed Pedro 73 that the pickup point was

under heavy small arms and mortar attack. Radar equipped American artillery units could track enemy artillery and mortar rounds in flight. The artillery unit could then determine the exact position of the enemy artillery or mortar. With this information, they could fire their 105mm howitzers on the enemy tubes. This is known as counter-fire and occurs within minutes of the enemy firing on American forces. Pedro 73 remained clear of the area while the counter-fire neutralized the enemy mortars. When it became apparent that the situation on the ground was deteriorating, Capt Salem decided to dispense with the chain saw but still use his PJ to expedite recoveries. A1C Pitsenbarger, wearing all of his gear, also carried a bag containing medical supplies. There was no standard medical kit at this time. The PJs at Bien Hoa AB had designed the one Bill was now carrying. It was basically a trauma kit with bandaging, splinting supplies and morphine for pain. Inside the helicopter there were additional supplies, including IV fluids to treat shock.

Hal Salem warned his crew that they were five minutes out. The rescue crew flew in a nervous quiet. On the ground, Charlie Company was fighting for its life. Receiving a radio call to come on in, Capt Salem

pulled his Pedro into a hover. "Pits" had already pulled down one of the three spring loaded penetrator seats. After he pulled the safety strap under his shoulders, he gave the HM a thumbs up. Captain Salem got a last glimpse of Pits as the slack was taken out of the hoist cable and the PJ stepped out the door. Bill Pitsenbarger had a big grin on his face. He held on to his medical kit with his left hand and clutched his M-16 in the other. He motioned to the crew with his right hand and Airman Hammond began to lower Bill to the ground. Hal Salem said a silent prayer for his PJ as he disappeared from sight.¹⁰ It took about two minutes to lower "Pits" 150-feet to the ground. During these long seconds, the rescue crew could see the battle raging below them. Dead and wounded soldiers were clustered around the recovery point.¹¹

On the ground, Lt Kroah, and many of his men, looked up in astonishment to see Pitsenbarger voluntarily descending in a hail of bullets into their living hell. To soldiers amid the carnage of battle, Pits looked surreal. The majority of Charlie Company were now dead or wounded. Their situation was desperate and the odds were in the enemy's favor. All of the Americans might be slaughtered here, yet, just above them

was a young man in clean fatigues wearing a flack vest and a .38 caliber pistol, descending in the cooling rotor wash of a hovering silver Pedro helicopter. The soldiers concluded that the rescuemen had to be crazy to attempt this medevac.¹²

As soon as the penetrator touched the ground, Pits jumped off and immediately began treating the wounded. In the short time it took for the penetrator to go up and the litter to come down, he continually exposed himself to enemy fire as he triaged soldiers.

Pitsenbarger's experience expedited the loading of patients into the Stokes litter. This advantage dramatically cut down the amount of time the HH-43 crew had to spend in the vulnerable hover position. In the helicopter, A1C Hammond saw Bill's thumbs up signal and reeled up the first casualty. As soon as the litter came in the door, Captain Salem proceeded to Binh Ba. Without a PJ in the back to help the HM, Pedro 73 was able to handle only one litter patient per pickup.

As Pedro 73 departed, Pedro 97 arrived and proceeded to lower its litter. In addition to PJ Dave Milsten, crewmembers were

Captain Ronald Bachman (pilot), Captain Raymond Murden (copilot) and HM A1C Thomas Story. Bill had things going really smoothly on the ground, so SSgt Milsten stayed in his helicopter to assist the HM. They picked up two litter cases and headed back to Binh Ba. Pedro 97 quickly unloaded its patients, headed back to the battle site and made another litter pickup. Pits signaled for the penetrator but instead of coming up with one of the wounded, put two of them on the penetrator. Bill Pitsenbarger once again voluntarily elected to stay at the battle site.



Photo from Al Stanek

PJs display Stokes litter and forest penetrator next to HH-43 helicopter. Pararescuemen George Schipper (left) and Al Stanek in 1966 at Det 9 38 ARS, Pleiku RVN. Forest penetrator is in stowed position. Three hinged seats can be at its base can be pulled down to sit on. Both PJs have a hand on the Stokes litter.

He could see that many injured soldiers still needed his help. With three wounded on board, Pedro 97 headed back to the MASH. With Bill Pitsenbarger on the ground, the process of hoisting survivors was going much faster; he was making a difference.



PJ Bill Pitsenbarger with defensive weapons carried by PJs in 1966. He has an M-16 rifle with 20-round magazine and a .38 pistol. Bill is also wearing a flack vest of the era. These vests would not stop bullets but offered some protection against metal fragments from grenades, etc. Note the HH-43 is not painted camouflage at this stage of the war.

Pedro 73 was waiting its turn and moved in as soon as 97 departed. This would be the sixth HH-43 recovery, the third for Pedro 73. When the litter was approximately 10-feet from the ground, all hell broke loose as the VC attempted to shoot down the chopper. Pedro 73 took hits all over the aircraft and then lurched, its power and rpm gauges racing over the red line. Battle damage had caused the throttle

to jam open resulting in the chopper moving forward and up. As Captain Salem struggled to regain control of his stricken bird, the chopper dragged the litter through the trees. Salem had two goals: he meant to keep his helicopter from crashing and he intended to recover his PJ. Using full right rudder, he regained partial control of the helicopter. The HM was running the hoist cable down at its maximum speed.

Captain Salem could see Pits and he gave him a hand signal to come up on the hoist. Pits saw that his helicopter was still taking ground fire, so he waved away his pilot. Hammond had the litter almost on the ground and signaled Pitsenbarger to get in it for recovery. Pits again signaled the helicopter to leave and appeared to be yelling at the crew to get the hell out of there. This was his second wave-off. Pits had decided to stay on the ground with the wounded Army troops.

The damaged helicopter was difficult to hover and the litter became entangled in a tree. HM A1C Hammond called to Salem to shear the cable to prevent the chopper from being swung into the ground. Luckily, the litter wasn't occupied when the HM threw the switch that cut the hoist cable.

With limited control of his HH-43 perilously limited, Capt Salem contemplated a crash landing in a rubber plantation located about two miles away. Not knowing how secure the plantation was, Capt Salem decided to try for a road just a little farther west. By the time they arrived at the road, Salem had begun to believe he could make it to Binh Ba. He radioed Binh Ba, informing them he was coming in for an emergency landing. Pedro 97, now at Binh Ba, immediately took off to provide cover for Pedro 73. Captain Salem coaxed his HH-43 to the ground at Binh Ba but the turbine engine could not be shut down using either normal or emergency procedures. AIC Hammond finally stopped the engine by using a hammer to beat the fuel control closed. There were nine holes in the side of the chopper, two of its four rotor blades had been shot up, and the armor plating in the cabin had stopped two .30 caliber rounds. Airman Hammond certainly appreciated that protection and his good luck.

With Pedro 73 safely on the ground, Pedro 97 headed back to the pickup point. There were at least 7 more known casualties and Bill Pitsenbarger. It was getting late in the day and Capt Bachman wanted to recover Pits before it got dark, but the

situation reports heard on the radio were all bad. Charlie Company was in close combat with exceptionally heavy fighting. All the troops, including the wounded, were literally fighting for their lives. There was no way for them to provide cover fire for the Pedro. The company commander made a desperate decision to call artillery in 360° around his position, completely encircling the pickup point with incoming 105mm artillery. As darkness set in, the ground troops radioed that their situation was untenable for further medevacs. Pedro 97 reluctantly headed back to Bien Hoa AB.

On the ground, Pits was running out of medical supplies. His small supply of morphine had been consumed, he had used the last of his splints and was now making improvised splints. The battle was intensifying. At 4 p.m., the VC started dropping mortar rounds on the U.S. soldiers. At 5:45 p.m., the VC brought up eight .30 caliber and two .51 caliber machineguns. One of the .51s was well positioned to decimate the American defensive position. Army Sgt James Robinson, saw the .51 gun. He had been repeatedly hit by rifle fire earlier, but had continued to fight. Although wounded, he moved from man to man

throughout his squad, redistributing ammo and encouraging his men to continue fighting. Out of M-16 ammunition, he grabbed two hand grenades and struggled to his feet behind a tree that provided some protection. With a scream of “Cover me!!!”, he emerged into the heavy machinegun fire and began a 20-yard dash directly at the gun. The gun fired at him as he released the grenades, both of which went off, killing the gun crew and silencing the weapon. During his heroic charge, Sgt Robinson had been mortally wounded and he died a few minutes later.¹³ Sgt James Robinson was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor for actions in this battle.

As twilight approached, VC snipers began firing from high in the trees. Resulting casualties created holes in the U.S. defensive perimeter, through which, the VC launched an assault of screaming troops. Charlie Company desperately fought back, occasionally hand to hand. The original plan of reinforcing Charlie Company by air became impossible because there were no clearings in which to land reinforcements. Charlie Company would live or die based on its ability to fight off the enemy.

During the battle, Lt Kroah watched in disbelief as A1C Pitsenbarger went about his work. *“I first saw Airman Pitsenbarger when he was being lowered from an Air Force helicopter. I observed him several more times during the course of the day. To put down on paper what this battle was like is an impossible task. At times the small arms fire would be so intense that it was deafening. All a person could do was get as close to the ground as possible and pray. It was on these occasions that I saw Airman Pitsenbarger moving around and pulling wounded men out of the line of fire and then bandaging their wounds. The pile of dead and wounded was growing. My own platoon medic 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 seen combat in both WWII and Korea. The psychological pressure was beyond comprehension. For Airman Pitsenbarger, to expose himself, on at least 3 separate occasions to this enemy fire was certainly above and beyond the call of duty of any man. It took tremendous courage to expose himself to the possibility of an almost certain death to save the life of someone he didn’t even know. I am certain the death count would have been much higher had it*

not been for the heroic efforts of Airman Pitsenbarger.”¹⁴

Army Sergeant Fred Navarro was a squad leader in this platoon and was wounded in the battle. Only two other men from his 10-man squad survived the battle. From his hospital bed in Vietnam he said, “Ten minutes after his helicopter was forced to leave, the firing became pretty heavy. Airman Pitsenbarger gave his pistol to one of the wounded men, who could not hold a rifle. He then took the wounded soldier’s rifle and moved from place to place, while under fire. Pits was collecting ammo from the dead and giving it to the wounded. He wanted to be ready to evacuate the wounded when the choppers returned. A Stokes litter was entangled the trees. Under enemy fire he climbed the tree and recovered the litter. He then placed it near one of the wounded. He treated some more of our wounded. The enemy was firing at us from up in the trees and from all directions around us. We were surrounded. Airman Pitsenbarger kept an eye on the area that was getting hit the hardest. He could see that our guys were again running out of ammo. He went back out, running all around the perimeter collecting ammo. Then he redistributed ammo to each soldier that was still alive. He

lay down near me. He must have had 20 magazines of ammo. Airman Pitsenbarger began returning fire. He must have been able to see the VC. He was one out of 15 in the company that was firing on semi-automatic. At about 7:30 p.m. he was hit by AK-47 fire and died. About 15 minutes later, the firing stopped for the first time. The VC women and children came in near our outer perimeter. They started slitting throats and taking weapons. While this was going on, I could hear about 100 VC hollering that they were going to destroy us. We were almost out of ammo. Lt Kroah radioed in for artillery. Five or six rounds came in every 15 seconds from about 8:30 p.m. until around 7 a.m.. Rounds were landing 25-30 meters from us. The artillery prevented the VC from mounting a final assault. I am lucky to be alive.”¹⁵

Back at Bien Hoa AB, the members of Det 6 worried about A1C Pitsenbarger. That the evening they phoned the 1st Infantry Division HQ. They were told that Bill was OK and that Det 6 could pick him up when they conducted additional medevacs in the morning. Relieved by this reassuring news, they tried to get some sleep. The alert crews reported to duty early and were told the

combat zone was still too hot to attempt medevacs and were ordered to wait at Bien Hoa AB. At 9:50 a.m., one HH-43 (Pedro 97) from Det 6 was allowed to head back into the battle site. Their high bird, Pedro 91, came from Det 10 at Tan Son Nhut. Both Pedros linked up with an airborne forward air controller (FAC) who briefed them that the battle had diminished and that the Army had moved reinforcements up to Charlie Company and they had used dynamite to clear a landing zone. Because air strikes were still going in ½-mile west of the pick-up spot, the Pedro and its crew were once again put into a holding pattern.

On board Pedro 97, the pilot, 1st Lt Mark Schibler briefed his crew (copilot Capt Edwin Henningson, HM A1C Alexander Montgomery and PJ A1C Henry O'Beirne). Finally, at 11:25 a.m., the crew of Pedro 97 were told they could head in for a pick-up. Pedro 97 landed and its crew looked around for Bill, but he was not seen. Three stable but severely wounded troops were on-loaded. When the Pedro left, Airman O'Beirne stayed behind to locate Pits.¹⁶ As A1C O'Beirne began searching for Bill, an Army Captain called him over and asked if he was an Air Force medic. After Henry identified himself, the Captain said, "*I'm*

sorry, your buddy was killed last night. He's somewhere over there." An Army private led Airman O'Beirne over to Bill's body. This was the first time any Air Force member heard of Airman Pitsenbarger's death. The private pulled back a poncho covering a body. It was Bill Pitsenbarger. O'Beirne examined the body and found that Pits had been shot four times. A1C O'Beirne placed his dead comrade into a body bag and moved Bill to the landing zone for extraction. He had little time to grieve, as many men still needed medical treatment. Sergeant Navarro told Henry about Bill's courageous actions. Another soldier told Airman O'Beirne that Lt Crowe wanted to speak with him. Lt Crowe had been shot four times, was seriously wounded and awaiting medevac. He had been in the outer perimeter when the VC women slipped in to kill the wounded and scavenge gear. The Lt had survived by playing dead. He told Henry about Bill's heroic actions. He wanted to make sure the Air Force knew what Bill Pitsenbarger had done for Charlie Company.¹⁷ After a few more hours of work, all of the rescuemen of Det 6 returned to Bien Hoa AB. The word flashed throughout Southeast Asia (SEA) that A1C William H. Pitsenbarger had been killed in action.

The survivors of Charlie Company and the Commander of Det 6, 38 ARRS nominated Airman Pitsenbarger for the Medal of Honor. As part of the documentation process, SSgt Ronald Sears of the Bien Hoa AB public affairs office interviewed many of the participants. He asked A1C O'Beirne, "*Did Pitsenbarger know what he was getting himself into when he volunteered to go down the hoist?*" O'Beirne replied, "*Yes, he did. He had done this many times before. He knew the score pretty well and he had been fired at quite a bit before. He knew the chance he was taking. It was not a case of going in there blindly.*"¹⁸

A few days after the mission, Bill Pitsenbarger's NCOIC sent out a seven page letter to all Pararescue Sections worldwide. In it, he outlined the facts of the mission. At the letter's conclusion, he said this; "*We have lost a good friend and he was one of the best PJs in the game. I don't believe there was anything that Pits did not excel in. . . He died doing his job. If he had known the consequences of going down that hoist, it would not have slowed him down a bit. We know these Army recovery missions are no picnic, but up till now we have been real lucky. These medevacs are not our job. But*

as long as there is not anyone else here to do it, we will continue as long as the need exists. Losing Pits will not slow us down. I only hope we do not lose anyone else. We all understand the risks. It's just too bad the Army cannot get hoist equipped helicopters over here. Their "Dust Off" UH-1s do a great job, but must land to pick up casualties. Air Rescue could do a much better job with HH-3s, picking up 10 – 15 at a time. But as long as we only have our HH-43s, we're stuck. If any of you have any questions drop me a line."

SSgt Dave Milsten
PJ NCOIC Bien Hoa AB, RVN¹⁹

During the days following this mission, the Army tallied up its losses. Charlie Company had suffered a casualty rate of 79%. Of the 134 men who had entered the jungle on 11 April, only 28 were able to fall in for extraction. The Army nominated Sergeant James Robinson for the Medal of Honor. The award was approved and presented to his father, at a Pentagon ceremony, on 16 July 1967. This battle had serious political ramifications. General Harold Johnson, Army Chief of Staff, flew to Vietnam. He personally informed Military Assistance Command (MACV) commanders that the American people would stop

supporting the war if such high casualties continued. Colonel Arthur Beall, Commander 3rd Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Group (ARRGp) recommended Pitsenbarger for the Medal of Honor (MOH). The published 3rd ARRGp history of April – June 1966 contains this statement on page 28: “. . . *For his heroic actions in assisting the defenders during the onslaught, A1C Pitsenbarger has been recommended for the posthumous award of the Medal of Honor.*” The recommendation was forwarded to Headquarters Pacific Air Force (PACAF) in Hawaii. The PACAF staff referred it back to MACV. There, Lt Gen John Heintges ordered that it be downgraded to an Air Force Cross (AFC). The general further ordered that all correspondence regarding this MOH be routed directly to his office. No one will ever be able to prove the motivation behind this action. Perhaps this personal attention was to guarantee that the Air Force Cross would be approved. Or perhaps the slaughter of Charlie Company was an embarrassment that would only be highlighted by the publicity a second Medal of Honor, in the same battle, would generate.

On September 22, 1966, at a ceremony in the Pentagon, Air Force Chief of Staff

General John McConnell presented the Air Force Cross to Airman First Class Pitsenbarger’s parents. McConnell also announced that Airman Pitsenbarger had earned the Airman’s Medal, four Air Medals and the Purple Heart for other missions flown in Vietnam. Citing the motto of the Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service “That Others May Live,” the General told Bill’s parents that the men with whom their son lived and flew “are famous for their courage.”



Photo courtesy of William Pitsenbarger and Flesh Public Library Piqua Ohio

AF Chief of Staff Gen John McConnel presents the Air Force Cross to the parents of A1C Bill Pitsenbarger on 22 September 1966. Irene and William Pitsenbarger accepted the posthumous award on behalf of their only son.

Ohio Senator Frank Lausche witnessed the couple accepting the AFC and inserted a tribute to Bill Pitsenbarger into the Congressional Record (September 22,

1966). Part of it read: *“I was present when this high award was made to the mother and father of William Pitsenbarger. They stood there heroically, reflecting the courageous and stalwart character of their son. The mother was brave. The father shed tears. But both were proud. Ohio is proud of Airman First Class William Pitsenbarger and his parents.”* Bill Pitsenbarger made Air Force history when he was posthumously awarded the Air Force Cross. During the Vietnam War, the United States Air Force awarded its second highest decoration for heroism, the Air Force Cross, to only nineteen enlisted men. Of these nineteen awards, ten were awarded to Pararescuemen. Bill Pitsenbarger was the first enlisted man to receive this decoration in the Vietnam War.

Time passed and the war continued. Each PJ who served in Vietnam after this incident learned the saga of “Pits.” Many PJs serving in SEA, including this author, used Bill’s sacrifice as the standard on which we based our wartime behavior. His greatest contribution may have been the inspiration he provided to future PJ’s. No one wanted to die on a rescue mission.

However, our duty was clearly exemplified by heroes like Bill Pitsenbarger.

In small groups all around the world PJs asked themselves, “Why was Pitsenbarger’s Medal of Honor downgraded to an Air Force Cross?” Of the 12 Medals of Honor awarded to USAF members during the Vietnam War, 11 went to officers. By 1970, the Pararescue conventional wisdom was that HQ USAF did not wish to award the MOH to an enlisted man prior to an officer receiving one. A variation on the same theme blamed HQ ARRS for the change in award. For more than three decades after the mission took place these myths persisted. Research in 1999 clearly showed the myths to be false. HQ ARRS wanted Bill Pitsenbarger to receive the MOH and were thwarted when the second ranking officer, in the MACV chain of command (Lt Gen Heintges), ordered it downgraded. Why this Army general downgraded the award is not found in any available public records. However, some historians have extrapolated that the MACV senior staff did not want a lot of adverse publicity about a battle that resulted in more than 80% U.S. casualties. In 1967, U.S. military and political leaders were still

trying to put a positive spin on the overall issues of the war.

For over 33 years, the Pararescue community remained dissatisfied with the decision to award Bill the Air Force Cross. Indeed, the PJs were not the only ones unhappy with the outcome. In 1992, the Piqua Ohio Chamber of Commerce requested that their Congressman try to get Bill's AFC upgraded to a Medal of Honor. Unfamiliarity with the complex military process required to accomplish this goal resulted in it not being accomplished. In 1999, another campaign was mounted to have this decision reviewed. PJs assigned to the Pentagon identified the requirements to process this request and a working group was organized to champion the cause. Probably, the most significant outcome of this group's efforts was that two professional historians began to investigate the facts of Bill's mission. Bill Chivallette and Parker Hayes, of the Airman Memorial Museum, did extensive research. As part of their research they collected witness statements from the Army survivors of Charlie Company. When combined with USAF mission reports, USAF witness statements and unit histories, they had a solidly documented case for consideration

for an MOH. The Air Force Sergeants Association (AFSA) provided the manpower to consolidate all of the paperwork into a written award nomination. In April 1999, the AFSA completed the nomination package and provided copies to Ohio Congressman Boehner and the Pentagon. The package was then entered, by the Congressman and Pentagon staffers, into the bureaucracy that would process it.

On 15 May 2000, the Secretary of the Air Force, the Honorable Whit Peters concurred. He forwarded the nomination for review by congressional subcommittees, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Secretary of Defense. He also notified Congressman Boehner of his support for the award. This support by the SECAF would later prove to be critical. The Pentagon is a huge bureaucracy. Within the Pentagon, paperwork has been known to languish and disappear. Additionally, expeditious action on this type request is rare. Interested retired and active PJs became concerned about Bill's MOH nomination. It appeared that the package was not only stalled, but was on the verge of being sucked into a black hole and completely disappearing. A letter writing campaign was organized encouraging the

Congressman and SECAF to intercede. The SECAF requested the Director of the Air Force Review Board to intercede.

Mr. Joe Linebarger not only found the package but also ensured that it quickly moved through required coordination.

On 6 October 2000, Congress approved a bill that included the awarding of the Congressional Medal of Honor to Pararescueman A1C William H. Pitsenbarger. The Senate followed suit on 12 October 2000. The award ceremony took place at the Air Force Museum at Wright-Patterson AFB on 8 December 2000.

It was the largest Medal of Honor ceremony in the history of the award, attended by the largest ever gathering of Vietnam era Air Rescuemen. These men included PJs, pilots, FEs, maintenance personnel and many others assigned to Air Rescue during the Vietnam War. Over 1500 seats were filled. The guest list also included combat veterans from Charlie Company and hundreds of active duty, Air National Guard and Reserve Pararescuemen. Standing room exceeded the capacity of the largest room in the AF Museum. As Mr. Pitsenbarger entered to accept the award, he was amazed to observe over 420 retired and active duty

Pararescuemen, all proudly wearing their maroon berets. Most had traveled hundreds of miles at their own expense. Several had traveled from overseas assignments and others from American states as far away as Alaska.



USAF Photo

William and Irene Pitsenbarger accept the Medal of Honor, on behalf of their son Airman First Class William F. Pitsenbarger. The award is presented by SECAF Whit Peters.

At the request of Mr. Pitsenbarger, the Secretary of the Air Force, the Honorable F. Whitten Peters presented the award. The SECAF's words were few but well chosen. In part of his speech he said, "*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. 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.”

But Bill’s countrymen, his fellow Vietnam veterans, his family and friends

never forgot the sacrifice he made on 11 April 1966. All Pararescuemen, and all men who served in Air Rescue in Vietnam, were thrilled to see this extraordinary Pararescueman receive the ultimate recognition he deserved.



Photo provided by Harry O’Beirne
Airman First Class William F. Pitsenbarger

“With the recognition of William Pitsenbarger’s sacrifice, we also recognize that every PJ mission is a challenge to cheat death.”

General Michael E. Ryan Air Force Chief of Staff