

VALOR

# 'That Others May Live'

A1C Bill Pitsenbarger knew the risks involved when he volunteered to drop into the midst of a jungle firefight.

BY JOHN L. FRISBEE

**B**y April 1966, twenty-one-year-old A1C William H. Pitsenbarger, then in the final months of his enlistment, had seen more action than many a thirty-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 1500 hours, 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,



Pitsenbarger: First posthumous airman winner of the Air Force Cross.

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, Airman 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 fourteen 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. ■

*Warrior  
(Bill's Kamato or  
the name - April 11, 1968)*

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# Young Airman Gives Life to Aid Wounded Soldiers

BIEN HOA AB, Vietnam—AIC William H. Pitsenbarger, a parascue medic, died during the evening of April 11 so that wounded soldiers might live. He was 21 years old.

Pits, as he was known here, was killed by Viet Cong gunfire during a fierce jungle fight about 31 miles south-east of Bien Hoa.

He had voluntarily dropped from his rescue helicopter

to help load wounded soldiers aboard a sling which would lift them into the hovering chopper.

Pits was a first-termer, having entered service on the last day of 1962.

Though young, Pits had lived a life filled with adventure.

An eyewitness to his bravery at the time a VC bullet took Pitsenbarger's life is Army Sgt Fred C. Navarro, a squad leader who was one of the wounded Pits was trying

to save. Of Navarro's 10-man squad, only two survived from a hospital near this base. Navarro said his unit, "C" Co., 2d Bn., 10th Inf., 1st Inf. Div.—was involved in a heavy fight with the VC on April 11. Snipers' artillery fire were all about, and there were wounded.

Pits, who was off duty that day, volunteered to go (See AIRMAN, Page 15)



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Eastern Edition



# Airman Gives Life To Help Wounded

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their rescue. He was assigned to an HH-43.

The jungle where Pits died is dense. It has what soldiers call a three-canopy cover — three levels of tree heights. Some of the trees are 150 feet tall.

The Huskie pilot with whom Pits made his last flight is Capt. Harold D. Salem. To get into position to pick up the wounded, Salem had to hover in an area with 100-foot trees below him and 150-foot trees towering on all sides—some within five feet of his rotor blades.

Pits was aboard the Huskie when the crew made the first pickup and took the wounded to a field hospital at Binh Ba, a plantation about two miles from the battlefield.

Coming back to the jungle, Pits was lowered on his copter's winch line to the jungle floor to treat the wounded and get them into a litter so they could be lifted to the helicopter and out of what Navarro called "terrible fire."

No one ordered Pits to drop into the jungle. Going into a battle zone—even leaving a helicopter at the time of a rescue attempt — is voluntary for the pararescue medic. Pits knew what he was doing, what he would get into, but he went. He often said his first concern was for the wounded who needed him.

His drop from the helicopter placed him where the fighting was most fierce. As he treated some wounded men, he gave them ammunition taken from men who could no longer use it. Earlier he had given his own

pistol to a soldier so badly hurt he could not hold a rifle.

When he had done what he could for the wounded, Pits left the first group. Navarro didn't know what Pits did while he was away, but about 10 to 15 minutes later, the young paramedic returned to Navarro's side with 20 magazines of rifle ammunition.

He crouched among the wounded and used a rifle to pour out fire.

"Pits must have seen the VC, for he was the only one using semi-automatic fire. The rest of us were on full automatic, just spraying the bushes and trees, hoping our fire would hit," Navarro said. The soldier said he saw VC snipers fall from trees after they were hit.

Fifteen minutes after returning to the wounded men Pits lay dead in the jungle.

The battle raged on. Rescue helicopters from Pitsenbarger's unit, Det. 6 of the 38th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Sq., tried to descend. They were driven away by the heavy fire.

Darkness brought a halt to the firing and also brought, Navarro said, the VC women and children who infiltrated in the blackness to slit the throats of wounded soldiers and take away weapons and ammunition. The women and children carried dead VC away so the Americans would not know how many were killed.

Navarro's unit called in artillery during the night to drive back the VC forces. Five or six rounds came in every 15 seconds from 8:30 that night until 7 the next morning.

A helicopter crew brought Pits body out of the jungle that morning.

Col. Arthur Beall, AF rescue chief in Vietnam, said the young airman had displayed incredible bravery.

PITS CAME to Vietnam on August 8. He had completed Army paratrooper training at Fort Benning, Ga., had gone to the U.S. Navy underwater swimmers school, the rescue and survival technicians medical course

and the Air Force combat survival course at Stead AFB, Nev. He trained to jump into the jungle at Eglin AFB, Fla., went to the Tropical Survival School at Albrook AFB, C.Z., and attended the fire-fighters course for the HH-43 helicopter.

Life in the military was exciting for Pits. He went to Perth, Australia, as a pararescue medic on Gemini and Mercury space probe recoveries. Last fall, he was on the helicopter which took singer Mary Martin from Tan Son Nhut AB to Bien Hoa.

According to his squadron mates, he liked to go on flights carrying doctors to treat patients at a leper colony in VC-infested territory near Bien Hoa.

Pits made 300 flights in Vietnam.

He was nominated for the Airman's Medal recently after he dropped on a helicopter winch line into a minefield to rescue a Vietnamese soldier. The soldier had unknowingly entered the minefield while fighting a fire, and set off a mine which blew off part of his foot.

Pits was the type of man no one could dislike. "He probably had his faults, but no one working with him could say just what they were," said A1C Henry J. O'Bierne, a pararescue medic.

Sgt. Maurice G. Keesler, Pitsenbarger's commander, said Pits was "one of a breed—ready to go on any mission. He was always there when needed."

Capt. Dale L. Potter also knew him. He said, "You don't replace someone like Pits."

## Hanoi Broadcast

CAN THO—Air Force men a AB here, deep in the Mekong D, gratulating themselves on their "na

The base was heavily mortared Cong recently, but almost all of missed the target.

Total friendly casualties: 70 Vietnamese and three wounded A try dogs. Two trucks were damaged, gasoline drums were punctured, b ments. The only aircraft hit was sported a small hole.

In the subsequent counteratt, namese sentries, several Viet Con, or wounded.

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