

LADIES and GENTLEMEN, DISTINGUISHED GUESTS

I would like to THANK everyone here for joining us to dedicate this memorial HONORING a local hero, A1C William Hart Pitsenbarger.

There are MANY of Airman Pitsenbarger's fellow Pararescuemen here with today. EACH of them could come up here and tell us of MISSIONS flown long ago and comrades WHO GAVE THEIR LAST FULL MEASURE on these missions living up to the Pararescue motto THESE THINGS WE DO THAT OTHERS MAY LIVE.

I would like to RECOGNIZE 4 of these Pararescuemen who provided the wording on this memorial

Sgt Doug McGill

Sgt Larry Palmer *BACK SURGERY*

Sgt Tom Stone

Sgt Mike Sherman

There are 3 Pararescuemen RESTING with Bill in this cemetery and I understand there are more who are planning to be buried here to be near Bill.

MOST of you are aware of Bill Pitsenbarger's heroic actions in Vietnam that EARNED him the Air Force Cross, *AND* 34 years later, the MEDAL OF HONOR.

There were MANY involved in getting this upgrade approved, including his fellow Pararescueman that were with him in Vietnam and the soldiers of Charlie Company who he died trying to save.

BEING a Pararescueman then and today is one of most DEMANDING and CHALLENGING and I might add DANGEROUS jobs in the military. Pararescue lost 19 PJs in Vietnam, 16 in the War on Terrorism and 53 others in the line of duty due to aircraft crashes, parachuting, mountain climbing SCUBA diving and a long list of other training accidents.

I would like to BEGIN by describing a little about our unit in Vietnam and our mission. NEXT I would like to describe the events that occurred on April 11, 1966 as I witnesses them and CONCLUDE with some INFORMATION about CHARLIE COMPANY and what they witnessed that day of Bill's heroic actions

Bill and I were ASSIGNED to Detachment 6, 38th Air Rescue Squadron as part of a 5 man Pararescue team. Prior to 1964, the Air Force Air Rescue Service was not involved in the war. The Army CLAIMED they had enough helicopters to cover all missions, but they did not have hoists and WERE USING ropes and found it very difficult if not impossible to recovery downed airmen and battlefield casualties from jungle covered areas, where trees could reach 150' or higher and so dense you couldn't see the ground thru them.

Det 6 at Bien Hoa AB was the FIRST Air Rescue unit to be sent to Vietnam in mid 1964. A Year later Bill and I volunteered to go over to replace the first members sent over. By this time, THREE more small air rescue detachments had arrived to cover all of SOUTH and NORTH Vietnam as well as THAILAND and Laos. These units were small, had 3 HH-43 Kaman Huskey helicopters with 20 crewmembers and other support personnel. The HH-43 was a SHORT-RANGE helicopter designed for peacetime Local Base operations. The Air Force added some ARMOR plating to protect the crew and critical engine components, a stronger ENGINE, self-sealing fuel tanks and ^{MOST IMPORTANTLY} INCREASED the hoist cable ^{LENGTH} from 100' to 210'.

The H43 was a SHORT RANGE helicopter and when the crews had to fly deep into Laos or North Vietnam, they carried fuel bladders in the cabin and the PJ had to hand pump the fuel from the bladders into the helicopter's fuel tanks.

LATER in the war our JOLLY GREEN helicopters were air refuellable and were armed with three gatling guns that together could fire 12,000 rounds a minute to protect themselves. Our protection consisted of the PJ sitting in the open doorway holding his M-16.

Our PRIMARY mission was providing local crash rescue coverage and providing downed aircrew recovery. Because our helicopters were the ONLY helicopters in our theater of operations with rescue hoists, we were often called upon to recover wounded Army personnel from jungle covered areas that Army couldn't get to.

MOST of these operations involved the hoist recovery of one or two wounded soldiers with LITTLE enemy opposition. The enemy would AMBUSH small Army patrols and then FADE away before help could arrive. They usually left a COUPLE of snipers behind and we would occasionally take hits while making hoist recoveries.

We didn't know it, but in EARLY 1966 both the US and the enemy changed their method of conducting the war. We INCREASED our strength from 150,000 to 360,000 which gave us the capability to take the war to the enemy.

` The ENEMY also changed from hit and run tactics to try to engage larger units by making direct contact. Their NEW POLICY was to stay and fight and get close enough to our units to "grab them by their belts". This would prevent our use of airstrikes or heavy artillery while they attempted to destroy our units.

OPERATION ABALINE was a major effort by the 16th and 18th Infantry Regiments of the 1st Infantry Division to seek out and destroy a major Viet Cong front line unit, Battalion D-800 in a HEAVLY covered jungle area east of Saigon. Charlie company, along with Alfa and Bravo companies of the 16th were making a coordinated push through the heavy jungle.

The PLAN was for one of the three companies to make contact with the enemy unit and then back off and let the fighters and artillery do their work. If ONE company ran into difficulties, the other two would move in to help.

UNFORTUNATELY, the ¹³⁶~~134~~ men of Charlie Company found the enemy's base camp and were COMPLETELY surrounded by enemy forces and the jungle was too thick for other units to move in to assist.

The 4 platoons of Charlie Company were forced to form a DEFENSIVE circle to fight off the enemy attacks. During a lull in the battle, they blasted down a few trees in the center of their position and called for help from our rescue unit to hoist evacuate their wounded.

We were NOTIFIED at 1507 that 6 or more army casualties required hoist extraction from an area 35 miles from Bien Hoa. Bill, ^{PVT SEV BARRER} and I were on alert that day and were airborne in 5 minutes. I was the PJ on Pedro 97 and Bill was on Pedro 73.

WE FLEW all off base missions with two helicopters, one to cover the other. We arrived in the area and observed purple smoke coming up through the trees from Charlie Company. WE WERE unaware that we had just flown into what was to become one of the bloodiest battles of the war, the battle of Xi Cam My.

The hole was just big enough for us to lower ourselves about 50' down with tree limbs coming within 5 feet of our rotors. We couldn't drop any lower because of smaller trees and heavy brush. As we lowered our stokes litter I observed Charlie Company members dragging wounded soldiers to the center of the little clearing for hoist recoveries.

We made our FIRST recovery without any difficulty and I requested my pilot to pull up and out of the hole to enable my hoist operator and me to remove our casualty from the stokes litter and rereg it for a second pickup and ALLOW Pedro 73 with Bill on board to go in for their first pickup.

WE DIDN'T know it at the time, but we were probably hovering directly over enemy troops, but the jungle was too heavy for them to see us and they probably didn't want to give away their positions by firing at us.

Our PICKUP took less than 5 minutes but Pedro 73 ran into problems and took a lot longer to make their first recovery. They finally pulled up out of the hole and flew away, headed for Binh Ba, an artillery position about 8 miles away, to drop off their casualty. We dropped back down into the hole and made our second litter pickup, experiencing no difficulty and then flew off to Bien Ba to join Pedro 73 and drop off our two casualties.

My helicopter had to REFUEL from rubber bladders the army had positioned there and Pedro 73 dropped off their casualty and flew away to make more pickups. They had experienced MAJOR DIFFICULTIES during their first pickup. The soldiers on the ground had placed the casualty into the stokes litter without first removing him from a litter made from a poncho and 10 foot poles or strapping him in. On the way up, the poles became caught in trees, almost flipped over several times and just about dumped the casualty out. Once they got the litter to Pedro 73, they had to fly away with the litter hanging outside, the poles prevented them from getting the litter in through the small door.

BACK

ENROUTE[^] to the pickup point, Bill requested the pilot to lower him to the ground to assist the troops and speed recovery operations up. His pilot, Capt Salem, DIDN'T WANT to send him down because it was a very unsafe environment and he knew he might not be able to get Bill back. Bill was INSISTANT and Capt Salem reluctantly agreed to lower Bill down.

Bill sent one litter patient up to Pedro 73 and Capt Salem departed since without Bill onboard he could only make one recovery at a time. We were hovering nearby and dropped down to make a rescue seat recovery with two casualties and another litter hoist. Pedro 73 was refueling, so we dropped off our 3 casualties and returned for two more litter recoveries. We were told to orbit the area since the unit was receiving heavy ground fire and mortar rounds After a 10 minute delay, we were cleared to go back in. With Bill on the ground, the evacuations were going smoothly and I sent a message down for him to get back to Pedro 73 which was hovering nearby and ready to go back in.

We pulled out with our two litter patients and Pedro 73 dropped back in. When their litter reached 10 feet from the ground, they were hit by heavy small arms fire. They ^{LOST POWER AND} were put into a descending right turn but before crashing a bullet hit their fuel control valve and gave them 100 percent power. They were able to climb out of the hole by holding full right rudder and limped back to Binh Ba. They were still at 100 percent power so had to make a full running landing. After stopping, they found they couldn't shut the engine down or stop the rotor blades. The FE had to hammer the fuel valve shut and wait for the rotors to wind down since the rotor brake had been shot off.

We were EnRoute to the pickup point and heard their distress call, so we escorted them until they landed and then returned to make more recoveries and get Bill back. We were told to orbit the area since the ground forces were in heavy enemy contact with the enemy too close for air support. Very shortly afterward the pickup point was completely encircled in artillery fire. We remained in the area for a couple more hours and were finally informed by the ground forward controller that the situation was such that no more extractions could be made and we should return to Bien Hoa.

We were informed that Bill and 7 remaining wounded were being moved to a safer area and they would be extracted by Army helicopters the next morning. If only this would have been true, for Charlie Company found itself in one of the bloodiest battles of the war, suffering 80% casualties including our Bill Pitsenbarger.

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My helicopter, Pedro 97 , was the only one we had flyable the next morning, and our alert Pararescueman, A1C Harry O'Beirne and crew returned to the battle scene. They were the first helicopter that could land and that is when we found out we had lost Bill and of his heroic

actions during the battle. *THIS WAS A SHOCK TO HARRY BECAUSE WE HAD BEEN ASSURED DURING THE NIGHT THAT BILL WAS STILL ALIVE*

I wasn't on the ground but have met many of Charlie Companies survivors who described to me what the battle was like and of Bill Pitsenbarger's heroic actions that day. It would be very difficult for me to try and describe what the battle was like. Author Tracy Derks wrote a book titled PARTICULAR BRAVERY, THE BATTLE OF XA CAM MY AND THE DEATH OF A GRUNT COMPANY that provides a very good description of what happened that day.

Charlie Company's Robert Johnson, who is portrayed by the actor Peter Fonda in the movie THE LAST FULL MEASURE, did two tours in Vietnam. He described the battle as the most ferocious and bloody he witnessed during all of his months he spent in combat.

3rd Platoon Leader, Marty Kroah, who was portrayed by Samuel Jackson in the movie, said that at times the small arms fire would be so intense that it was deafening and all a person could do was to get as close to the ground as possible and pray

He said for Airman Pitsenbarger to expose himself to this enemy fire was far above and beyond the call of duty of any man. It took tremendous courage to expose himself to the possibility of almost certain death in order to save the life of someone he didn't even know.

“ Private David Peters arrived in Vietnam on 27 March and was assigned to Charlie Company on 7 April. He was tasked with helping Bill getting the wounded to the small clearing. He said that all the names and memories of that day still bring pain but one name and one memory will always remain special. It was Pitsenbarger's simple comment to him “You guys really have got yourselves into something here.” I believe he knew he was talking to one terrified brand new soldier. There was only one man on the ground that day that would have turned down a ride out of that hellhole and that man was Pitsenbarger.

1Lt Johnny Libs was the 2nd Platoon Leader, was Ranger qualified, and had been in combat for 10 months. He said had never encountered such dense triple canopy jungle. We could literally not see more than 5 to 6 feet in front of us. The battle was getting more fierce by the minute when I observed Airman Pitsenbarger being lowered to our position. I remember saying to my machine gunner "THE GUY COMING OUT OF THE HELICOPTER from above in an Air Force uniform must be out of his mind to come down from his not-so-safe helicopter to this inferno on the ground.

We were in the fight for our lives and I just couldn't understand why anybody would put himself in grave danger if he didn't have to. I realized he was going way above the line of duty with absolutely no regard for his personal safety.

I will tell you that when Bill Pitsenbarger lowered himself down through the triple canopy, the fighting on the ground was consuming and very dangerous. I take my hat off to Bill, and he is welcome into my foxhole anytime. It is not very often when a grunt infantryman goes outside his circle to welcome an outsider, but Bill is one of us.

CHARLIE COMPANY LOST 37 ↓

I hope I have given you some of the reasons I and the rest of Bill's fellow Pararescuemen hold him in such high regard. He truly lived up to the Pararescue motto, he gave his LAST FULL MEASURE, and set the highest standard for us to live by.

Thank you for allowing this old Pararescueman to tell you Bill 's story. I continually relive that day that occurred more than 59 years ago and thank you for providing this memorial honoring Bill Pitsenbarger.

CHARLIE COMPANY LOST 37 MEN ON 11 APR AND HAD 71 WOUNDED

ONLY 28 OUT OF 136 CLIMBED ABOARD THE HELICOPTER UNSCATHED THE NEXT MORNING

NO ONE KNOWS FOR SURE HOW MANY BILL PITSENBARGER SAVED THAT DAY

BUT ALL OF CHARLIE COMPANY SAYS THE DEATH COUNT WOULD HAVE BEEN FAR HIGHER IF BILL WOULD NOT HAVE COME DOWN THE HOIST THAT DAY

