



# Portraits in Courage

## William Pitsenbarger

You are looking at a man playing with a monkey. We've all got photos like this. Clowning around. Having fun. But not all of us end up heroes. This was A1C William H. Pitsenbarger. "Pits." You've probably heard of him because of the way he died. You should remember him because of the way he lived. April 11th, 1966. The Battle of Xa Cam My. Charlie Company had been led into an ambush. Heavy casualties. Perimeter failing. Requesting immediate help to get men out. The Army helicopters wouldn't go in because it was too dangerous. But an Air Force pararescue unit overheard the call and volunteered to go in anyway. Nobody woke up that morning knowing that history would look back at this as one of the bloodiest days of the Vietnam War. For Pits, it was his day off. Naturally, he volunteered to come along. He was dropped down into the firefight as the Air Force Huskies hovered. The helicopters were receiving heavy fire; Charlie Company was receiving heavy fire. Soldiers lay wounded and dying, and they were running out of ammo. Pits was there to retrieve casualties, care for the wounded and get them up into the helicopter and back to base as quickly and as safely as possible. The helicopter was heavy with the wounded and dead. To this day, the pilot doesn't know if he could've made it out of there with Pits onboard. He had put the

<http://www.airman.af.mil>

better part of a dozen wounded aboard the Huskies...and then waved off his ride home. Why did William H. Pitsenbarger stay behind? Our lives are made up of moments and choices. Pits was a PJ who'd completed over 300 rescue missions in Vietnam. He had nothing to prove. He knew exactly what he was looking at. This was a slaughter. And in that moment, he chose to stay. As the fighting went on through the night, he saved the wounded and gathered guns and ammo from the dead in the cover of darkness. He snuck outside the perimeter to bring back men that'd been hit. He covered up one wounded soldier with two dead bodies and told him to stay down. That soldier watched Pits take his first bullet. It's hard to say how many members of Charlie Company owe their lives that night to William H. Pitsenbarger. He was shot three times and never stopped. He cared for the wounded, shot back at the muzzle flashes and when he could, he looked into the eyes of men who knew they were dying...and just wanted him to hold their hands so they wouldn't feel alone. The next morning, April 12th, 1966, when the battle was over, most of Charlie Company had been annihilated. During the fight, the Viet Cong would sneak into the perimeter and kill the wounded. Pits lay among the casualties. There was a bullet hole in the forehead of the gas mask he wore. The pararescue emblem is an angel with her hands around the world. William H. Pitsenbarger was no angel. He was a ladies' man. He was a clown. He was known to be reckless and foolhardy in his youth. He was a stock boy from a small town who told his parents on New Year's Eve that he was jumping a train that night to report for duty in the Air Force. He was Pits. He was an Airman. And he was awarded the Medal of Honor. We don't "win" the Medal of Honor. This is not a contest. We are not asking you to die for your country. In fact, that's the last thing Pits would want. Simply ask yourself, "Why did he stay?" This was not a man who died the right way; this was a man who lived the right way. By living the core values. We lead the way...by showing the way. Remember William H. Pitsenbarger. Remember these things he did so that others may live. Aim high, Airman.