

BIOGRAPHY

Richard Etchberger grew up in Hamburg, PA. Friends and former teachers recall him as a friendly and popular student, who played basketball, participated in club activities, and became president of his class. He enjoyed camping on the slopes of the nearby Blue Mountain.

He joined the Air Force in 1951. When a head injury from high school sports prevented him from becoming a pilot, he became a specialist in radio and radar maintenance. In 1967, Chief Master Sergeant Etchberger and his wife were flown to Washington, where they were both sworn to secrecy about his next assignment: He was to become one of some 40 airmen tasked to operate covert radar installations in Laos. Since the American military did not officially operate in neutral Laos, CMSgt Etchberger and the other technicians had to leave the Air Force and become civilian employees of Lockheed Aircraft Services, which as a private company was allowed to operate in Laos. CMSgt Etchberger was one of a team of 19 who operated Lima Site 85 from November 1967 to March 1968. During this time, they directed 507 strike missions in North Vietnam and Laos – 27% of all such missions in these areas.

The strikes attracted the attention of the North Vietnamese military, which attacked the site from the air before infiltrating sapper and combat troops to surround the installation. On March 11, 1968, hundreds of North Vietnamese soldiers attacked. A commando team that had scaled the sheer cliff ambushed around 3 am, quickly killing most of the operating team. CMSgt Etchberger and several of his colleagues were pinned down by rifle fire and beset by grenades, which they kicked away while returning fire. CMSgt Etchberger displayed exceptional heroism during this battle. As his citation for the Air Force Cross describes:

“The enemy was able to deliver sustained and withering fire directly upon this position from higher ground. His entire crew dead or wounded, Chief Etchberger continued to return the enemy’s fire thus denying them access to the position. During this entire period, Chief Etchberger continued to direct air strikes and call for air rescue on his emergency radio, thereby enabling the air evacuation force to locate the surrounded friendly element. When air rescue arrived, Chief Etchberger deliberately exposed himself to enemy fire in order to place his three surviving wounded comrades in the rescuer slings permitting them to be airlifted to safety.”

CMSgt Etchberger had placed two comrades in the helicopter’s rescue sling before bear-hugging one more into the sling and to safety. But as the helicopter lifted off, it was stuck with a barrage of armor-piercing fire. One bullet pierced the underbelly, and struck CMSgt Etchberger. He bled to death before the rescue craft could reach the hospital.

At first, CMSgt Etchberger’s wife and sons were told that he had died in a helicopter crash. The local newspaper in Hamburg, PA reported the same, with little further information. But the family suspected there was more to the story when the family was invited to Washington for a private ceremony in which Catherine Etchberger accepted the Air Force Cross on her husband’s behalf. Though Catherine had long known the true nature of her husband’s mission, she kept silent until it was declassified in 1982.

CMSgt Etchberger had been nominated for the Medal of Honor soon after the events at Site 85. But since he was not officially in the Air Force at the time, and since Site 85 was in a neutral country, President Johnson felt that the award could not be granted. Even long after the mission was declassified, and pressure for honoring CMSgt Etchberger grew, the existence of Site 85 was deemed too sensitive to highlight by awarding him a Medal of Honor.

But the long battle for recognition slowly bore fruit: A 1998 book about the mission raised public awareness, and led to his official inclusion on the Air Force's list of recipients. Since that time, the Air Force has named several streets, buildings, and a memorial after CMSgt Etchberger. In 2005, his home town of Hamburg, PA held a parade in his honor, and raised funds to construct a memorial. In 2006, Rep. Earl Pomeroy (D-ND), working with a group of veterans from the 1st Combat Evaluation Group, submitted an application to waive the two-year limit on nominations for the Medal of Honor. In 2008, Air Force Secretary Michael Donley approved the application. By 2010, lawmakers in Congress and the White House had also signed off, thus clearing the way for CMSgt Etchberger to receive the nation's highest military honor.

CMSgt Etchberger is the first airman to receive the Medal of Honor since Dec 8, 2000. His sons will accept the medal from President Obama on Sept 21, 2010 during a ceremony at the White House.