

December 8, 2000

By: Ed Woods

The Falcon and the Medal

I sat overwhelmed by the size of it all even though I had been here dozens of times.

The cavernous hangar of the U.S. Air Force Museum, Modern Flight Gallery, Dayton, Ohio stretched from the all-white sole-remaining example of the XB-70 supersonic Valkyre on one end, to a PBY Catalina like the one my father flew during the war on the other. In Between were dozens of aircraft displayed on the floor and ceiling along with row upon row of blue in the center. The few thousand visitors, mostly in Air Force uniforms, were just about all enlisted men, with few bars, oak leaves, eagles or stars to be seen. They sat in neat rows surrounding a small stage. We all stood as the Air Force Band played Ruffles and Flourishes and ushered in the Stars and Stripes. All at attention with the singing of the National Anthem, civilians placed right hands over their hearts. It was a moment of pride to be an American, holding back a lump in your throat.

We were there to honor one of their own; Airman First Class William H. Pitsenbarger with the awarding of the Medal of Honor, posthumously. His elderly father stood ready to accept the nation's highest award and his son's long awaited recognition.

Airman Pitsenbarger was one of a very select few as the statistics were reviewed. Of the 3400 MOH recipients (they never used the word, winner), only sixteen were from the Air Force, and only one of those was an enlisted man. And this one was coming thirty-four years after heroic deeds in some God-forsaken jungle in South East Asia.

Before the ceremonies began I wandered around the displays and marveled, as I had countless times before, over the most exciting examples of aviation history. I noticed a bird pass overhead banking and diving between aircraft suspended from the ceiling. "Great, somebody left a door open" I thought, just what they needed in a place like this, a pigeon; the worst enemy of paint and aluminum and cherished artifacts. It landed on a high tail in a far corner, too far to really make out, but I thought that it flew too fast and looked rather trim for a pigeon. And not

much food in this spotless place, I thought. If it didn't find its way out, it probably wouldn't last very long.

I wish I had met Airman William H. Pitsenbarger.

As the Secretary of the Air Force read the proclamation I felt particularly proud. Here I was, surrounded literally by the Air Force, as the Secretary mentioned the Infantry a half dozen times. Bill was a P.J., a pararescue jumper. An airborne medic, who in this action arrived in an antiquated helicopter. But here he came to the aid of Charlie Company of the Big Red One, Army Infantry, who were surrounded by a major Viet Cong force and taking heavy casualties. He volunteered, insisted really, that the pilot allow him to descend with the stretcher to give aid to the wounded and help them be lifted to safety. He gave aid to the injured. Nine men were airlifted out. Three times he could have also evacuated but instead stayed to help the Infantrymen. Mortar fire and one damaged helicopter halted rescue efforts. Bill continued to give aid, and retrieved weapons and ammunition from the dead and dying for those still able to fight. The onslaught intensified. The remaining Americans drew in tighter and called for close artillery strikes, hoping to survive the night. Bill was wounded three times and continued to fight along side the G.I.s, until an enemy bullet ended his life. He wasn't quite twenty-two. By morning and rescue, Charlie Company was decimated, only a few survived. But today, several of the nine soldiers Bill had rescued were in the audience. Heroic, undaunted, and Above and Beyond the Call of Duty, but his greatest trait was selflessness. I wish I had met Airman William H. Pitsenbarger.

During the proclamation the bird flew by again, he came in fairly low over the seated crowd. I don't know how many others noticed, but he landed on the long nose probe of the X-29 that was suspended above our heads. Now closer, its profile was unmistakable, an American Kestrel. He sat there silent, majestic, ridged, almost as if at attention. His head didn't move and struck a proud pose as if he knew to be there, on cue, to pay final homage to a downed airman. He stayed for a few minutes and then flew off on another mission.