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Medal of Honor sought for man slain during secret Laos mission

By ERIC ADLER The Kansas City Star



The Air Force Cross was awarded posthumously to Richard Etchberger for his courage.



NORMAN NG/The Kansas City Star
Cory Etchberger (top) was 9 — the same age his daughter Madison is now — when his father died on a secret mission in Laos. He was told his father died in a Vietnam crash. “I would say it wasn't until seven years ago that I really knew what had happened,” Etchberger said.

For most of his adult life, Cory Etchberger of Overland Park thought his Air Force father died in a helicopter crash in Vietnam in 1968. That's the cover story he was told.

Only as Etchberger aged, and his father's papers became declassified, did it become clear why a seemingly ordinary radar chief who died in what seemed to be an ordinary crash would be given a full-honor military funeral. And why, in a private Pentagon ceremony, he posthumously received the Air Force Cross for valor. And why his name is now affixed to streets and buildings at Air Force bases around the country.

Chief Master Sgt. Richard L. Etchberger died a hero on a secret mission that was a political time bomb.

Now — 37 years after Etchberger's death on March 10, 1968 — U.S. Rep. Earl Pomeroy of North Dakota, where Etchberger was once stationed, is working to have Etchberger awarded the Medal of Honor.

"Heroism knows no border," Pomeroy said in a telephone interview this week. "We want this evaluated again." The request is under review.

Pomeroy speaks of borders because Etchberger died on a classified "black ops" mission in Laos, the country neighboring North Vietnam. Laos was supposed to be neutral.

As part of the secret mission — some of which was declassified in 1983 — Etchberger and other radar operators resigned their ranks from the Air Force and ostensibly became employees of Lockheed Aircraft Systems.

Posing as Lockheed employees, they set up a radar station at what became known as Lima Site-85 at the top of Phou Pha Thi, a mountain about 120 miles from Hanoi.

From Phou Pha Thi, Etchberger and his comrades for months guided bombers to targets inside North Vietnam.

"It was an extraordinarily hazardous mission," said Timothy Castle, a former Air Force intelligence officer and author of *One Day Too Long*, a 1999 account of the battle at Site-85.

"Those men were only 20 miles from the North Vietnamese border," said Castle, now a professor of national security studies at the Naval War College in Rhode Island. "They were surrounded by tens of thousands of North Vietnamese forces."

In the wee hours of March 10, 1968, those forces attacked. Artillery shells and bombs rained down on the top of the mountain while, unbeknownst to Etchberger and his team, North Vietnamese commandos were scaling a sheer cliff wall to enter Site-85.

By 2 a.m., the site was overrun. Etchberger and several of his teammates high-tailed it over the face of a cliff, tucking themselves in a recess below the lip of the mountain.

"The North Vietnamese commandos were actually above them, in the night, shooting down on top of them," Castle said.

Etchberger's commanding officer, retired Air Force Col. Gerry Clayton, recalled how Etchberger single-handedly kept the enemy at bay for nearly seven hours.

"When the enemy overran the place, they discovered that Dick and three other men were down there and started rolling grenades," Clayton said from his home in Parrish, Fla. "Dick took his M-16. He kept firing."

Etchberger's Air Force Cross citation tells more:

"The enemy was able to deliver sustained and withering fire," the citation reads. "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 ..."

One by one, Etchberger hoisted his wounded friends into the sling, lowered by an unarmed Air America helicopter. Then it was his turn.

Once everyone was safe, Etchberger sat inside the chopper. As the helicopter pulled away, the enemy strafed its underside. Bullets pierced the metal. Etchberger was killed.

Clayton cried over the phone as he spoke about seeing Etchberger's body at a base in Thailand.

"When I opened Dick's hand," he said, "he was carrying a pair of pliers." Clayton explained that the U.S. team had booby-trapped the entire site.

Cut one wire, all the equipment was to burst into flame to stay out of enemy hands.

Etchberger never got the chance. "But his last thought before he left there was to make sure the place blew up," he said. "As far as being a hero, if anyone ever deserved the Medal of Honor, Dick is the one."

Clayton said Etchberger's name was submitted for consideration for a Medal of Honor. He thinks it was rejected because the mission was secret. Any fanfare would have embarrassed the United States and brought on international criticism.

"It looks like his posthumous recognition took the direction it did because of the secrecy of the Laos operation," Pomeroy, the congressman, said. "But heroism in service to the country ought to be evaluated based on the action of the soldier, not the politics surrounding the location."

Castle agreed.

"The fact that U.S. military people were in Laos was a violation of the Geneva Accords," he said. "We were in clear violation."

Seizing a secret U.S. radar station, he said, would have been "a tremendous propaganda coup for the communists."

"I mean everybody knew the United States was there. It was an open secret, but nobody could really prove it," Castle said. "Capturing Americans or capturing American equipment would prove it. That is why we bombed the site so quickly afterwards. We immediately started bombing."

Cory Etchberger, 46, a biology professor at Johnson County Community College, is pleased at the effort to upgrade his father's Air Force Cross to the Medal of Honor.

He was 9 years old when his father was killed. He remembers being in the living room in their Hamburg, Pa., home when the call came. His mom, who died in 1994, was with him. He was eating strawberry shortcake. He's never eaten it since.

"I would say it wasn't until seven years ago," as Castle was writing his book and contacted Etchberger, "that I really knew what had happened," Etchberger said.

Since then, Etchberger has collected much of his father's past. He keeps his father's medals and the tri-folded flag that draped his casket in an oak display case at the top of his second-floor landing.

He keeps scrapbooks of all his father's military papers, photographs of himself and his family at the Pentagon receiving his dad's Air Force Cross.

There is also a 1968 letter from Lockheed informing his mother that "your husband Richard died on March 10 while performing an important assignment for our company."

The process to upgrade the Air Force Cross to a Medal of Honor is long. Pomeroy's recommendation is passed on to the Air Force Personnel Center, then to the secretary of the Air Force Personnel Council, to the secretary of the Air Force, to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to the secretary of defense and finally to the president.

Etchberger has no guarantee that his dad's medal will be upgraded. But since 1999 and the publication of Castle's book, Air Force bases across the nation have been honoring his father. This fall, a new dormitory and recruit training center at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas, is to be named the Etchberger Training Complex. At Alabama's Maxwell Air Force Base, a museum called the Enlisted Heritage Hall now contains a full-size wax replica of Etchberger along with his story. A street at Tyndall Air Force Base in Florida is named Etchberger Court.

"If it doesn't come to be," Etchberger said of the Medal of Honor, "nothing will be different in our lives. We won't be disappointed. But it is certainly something we feel is well-deserved.

"As you might imagine, he was a great dad, too."

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Military honors

• ***Medal of Honor:*** *The nation's highest military honor is awarded to any individual in the Armed Services whose bravery or*

heroism in armed conflict go far beyond the call of duty and at great risk of his or her own life.

Established by Congress in 1862, the Medal of Honor has been awarded to more than 3,400 individuals.

- **Air Force Cross:** *The Air Force's highest honor. Awarded to individuals for extraordinary bravery and heroism during a military operation in which the individual's actions do not justify awarding of the Medal of Honor.*

Sources: U.S. Department of

Defense, Congressional Medal of Honor Society, U.S. Army Center of Military History.