



President awards posthumous Medal of Honor to Airman after classified Laos mission

by Tech. Sgt. Amaani Lyle
Secretary of the Air Force Public Affairs

9/21/2010 - **WASHINGTON (AFNS)** -- Following decades of secrecy so deep, even the honored family's matriarch took some details to her grave, hundreds met at the White House where President Barack Obama presented a fallen Airman with the nation's highest military decoration Sept. 21.

While saving at least three of his fellow Airmen's lives during a classified mission in Laos, Chief Master Sgt. Richard Etchberger, a ground radar superintendent with little to no training, braved a downpour of grenades before finally succumbing to enemy fire on March 11, 1968.

"For the Etchberger family, this is a day more than 40 years in the making," President Obama said.

The president explained that one of Chief Etchberger's three sons, Cory, was just nine years old when his brothers and mother were escorted to the Pentagon in 1968 for a small private presentation. Gen. John McConnell, the Air Force chief of staff at the time, presented the family with the service's second highest military medal, the Air Force Cross, posthumously awarded to Chief Etchberger.

"These three sons were told that their dad was a hero ... that he had died while saving his fellow Airmen, but they weren't told much else," President Obama said. "It turned out that (Catherine) had known about Dick's work all along...but she had been sworn to secrecy. And she kept that promise -- to her husband and her country -- all those years, not even telling her own sons."

Their father's work was classified, and for years, that was all they knew, the president said. Two more decades would pass before the chief's sons learned their father died not in Vietnam in a helicopter crash, but in Laos.

"That's when they began to learn the true measure of their father's heroism," President Obama said of the later declassified Lima Site mission.

Though he had only recently been issued a weapon, Chief Etchberger was among a select team of men to serve at one of the tallest mountains in Laos, where he and small team of fellow Airmen manned a tiny radar station and guided Airmen in an air campaign against North Vietnam.

"Dick and his crew believed that they could help turn the tide of the war, perhaps even end it," President Obama said.

Despite unstable mountainous terrain, enemies relentlessly lobbing grenades and the eventual realization that his entire crew lay dead or wounded surrounding him, Chief Etchberger continued to single-handedly stave off the enemy with an M-16, concurrently directing air strikes and calling for air rescue.

The enemy attacked into the night.

As fighters scaled the cliffs and overran the summit, Chief Etchberger watched one Airman perish or sustain injuries after the other. Eventually the chief stood alone.

"He was the very definition of a (non-commissioned officer): a leader determined to take care of his men," the president said. "When it looked like the ledge would be overrun, he called for airstrikes within yards of his own position, shaking the mountain and clearing the way for a rescue.



President Barack Obama presents the Medal of Honor posthumously to the sons of Air Force Chief Master Sgt. Richard L. Etchberger, honored for heroic actions in combat in Laos in 1968, during a ceremony in the East Room of the White House, Sept. 21, 2010. His sons are Steve Wilson (from left), Corey Etchberger and Richard Etchberger. (White House photo/Pete Souza)

And in the morning light, the president said, an American helicopter came into view.

The chief loaded his wounded men, one by one, each time exposing himself to enemy fire. According to witnesses, as the helicopter began to peel away, a burst of gunfire erupted below, mortally wounding the chief by the time they landed at the nearest base.

"Of those 19 men on the mountain that night, only seven made it out alive," President Obama said. "Three of them owe their lives to the actions of Dick Etchberger."

One of the wounded, retired Tech. Sgt. John Daniel, attended the ceremony along with Chief Etchberger's sons, Steve Wilson, Richard and Cory Etchberger.

The chief's son Richard said he still attends several Air Force events per year, adding, "I enjoy it because the Air Force keeps us in the fold and I get to talk to Airmen, to tell them a little bit more and more about my father's life."

"Richard Etchberger lived the Airman's Creed: to never leave an Airman behind, to never falter, to never fail," President Obama said.

The president echoed the words in the medal citation, emphasizing that the chief's "bravery and determination in the face of persistent enemy fire and overwhelming odds are in keeping with the highest standards of performance and traditions of military service."

Attendees also included First Lady Michelle Obama, Vice President Joe Biden, Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates, Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric K. Shinseki, Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Marine Corps Gen. James E. Cartwright, Air Force Secretary Michael B. Donley, other leaders of the armed forces, members of Congress, previous Medal of Honor recipients and friends of the Etchberger family to honor the man his son Cory has described as "an ordinary man who found himself in an extraordinary circumstance."