

# The Airmen Heritage Series

The Airmen Memorial Museum

**CMSgt RICHARD L. ETCHBERGER**



**TOP SECRET ENLISTED  
AIR FORCE CROSS RECIPIENT**

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**by Sean M. Miskimins  
and  
William I. Chivalette**

**Airmen Memorial Museum**



**CMSgt Richard L. Etchberger circa 1967. Photo courtesy of the Etchberger family.**

Personal courage is often a difficult value to quantify. As a personal trait of warriors, it is heralded and honored by nations that value their Armed Forces' men and women who place themselves in harms way and are willing to pay the ultimate sacrifice in service to their country. United States Air Force Chief Master Sergeant (Deceased) Richard L. Etchberger, had personal courage. Upon reflection, Chief Etchberger's life prior to his actions in Laos in 1968 can be summed up in the words of the Texas hero and patriot, Sam Houston, who is quoted as saying, *"You don't know me now, but you shall hear of me."*

To understand and appreciate the quiet professionalism, leadership and eventual uncommon valor of this seemingly ordinary Air Force non-commissioned officer (NCO) requires a look at the events of Etchberger's life – from a typical small town American childhood to a desolate mountaintop in Laos.

This monograph is written to help ensure that Chief Etchberger's heroic actions are not only remembered, but also to inspire others to emulate his professionalism in service, dedication to nation, and courage in the face of adversity.

Born in Hamburg, Pennsylvania, on March 15, 1933, Richard (Dick) Loy Etchberger was the

younger of two brothers. At an early age, Dick learned many of the core values that would remain with him throughout his life. His father, Donald, worked at a Hamburg hosiery mill making silk stockings until the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, thrust America into World War II. Life quickly changed for the Etchbergers when the hosiery mill closed because the silk was needed to make parachutes instead of stockings. With their father out of work, Dick and his older brother, Bob, pitched in to provide for the family by doing whatever odd jobs they could find in the Hamburg area. Due to the tough times, the Etchbergers moved to nearby Minersville, Pennsylvania, where Donald found work as a stockman in a small store.

Despite the hardships, Dick and Bob continued with their education and participation in athletics. Dick excelled in academics. "Dick had a photographic memory," recalled Bob. "When he would go upstairs to study, he would be done in ten minutes. Then he was back downstairs doing whatever he wanted. That used to infuriate me because I couldn't learn my lessons that quickly." Dick excelled not only in academics but also in sports. Bob said, "He [Dick] played a lot of basketball, and ended up being a star on the high school team."

When World War II ended in September 1945, the Etchberger family returned to Hamburg. In early 1946, Bob enlisted in the Navy and, in the fall, Dick began high school.

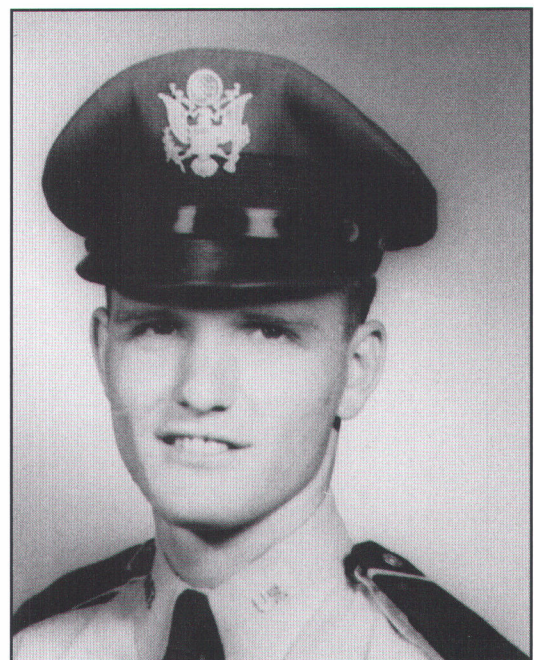
While attending Hamburg High School, Dick began to display his leadership potential. By the time he graduated in 1951, he had been a member of the speech club and the literary society, treasurer of the library club and senior class president. Along with all the academic, athletic and extracurricular activities, Dick continued helping the family by working with his dad who was employed at a Hamburg department store.

On August 31, 1951, a few weeks after high school graduation, Dick enlisted in the United States Air Force (USAF) and departed for Basic Military Training at Lackland AFB, Texas. Because Dick's entry scores indicated he had an extremely high aptitude for electronics, A3C Etchberger, upon graduation from basic training,

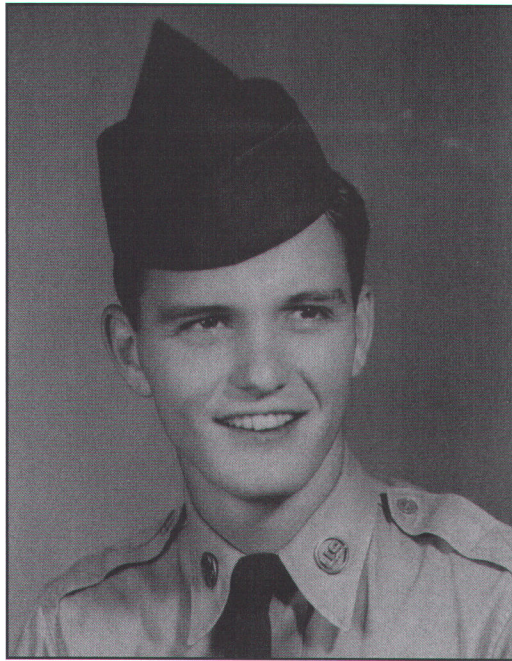
was assigned to Airmen Electronic Fundamentals School at Keesler AFB, Mississippi. Dick graduated from the course 5 months later and then attended the 7-month long Radar Maintenance School, also at Keesler AFB. By October 25, 1953, Dick had completed several electronics courses and was qualified as a Radar Operator. By May 1954, the young airman had also qualified as an Auto Track Radar Specialist. Dick was learning everything he could about electronics and quickly becoming a master in the field. As his son Cory recalls, "Dad was an electronics whiz, he used to build stereos and tape recorders at home."

During this time Dick found out that he was eligible to apply for an experimental aviation cadet training program for students who had less than two years of college. "Dick wanted to be a pilot," remembered Bob, "but he had received a head injury and was in a brief coma after playing high school basketball. That caused him some problems (headaches and equilibrium) during pilot training. He washed out of the pilot training program." Dick's dream of flying ended after spending 21 weeks as an aviation cadet.

On October 1, 1954, Etchberger was promoted to A1C and assigned as an Auto Tracking Radar Technician in the Salt Lake City



Aviation Cadet Etchberger circa May-Oct 1953.  
Photo courtesy of the Etchberger family.



Airman Etchberger circa 1952. Note the 505 uniform. Photo courtesy of the Etchberger family.

Detachment of the 11th Radar Bomb Scoring (RBS) Squadron located at Hill AFB in Ogden, Utah. During this assignment, Dick went to McClellan AFB, California, where he completed more electronics courses. Upon returning to Utah on November 15, 1955, Dick re-enlisted for six years with the intention of making the Air Force a career. By February of 1956, he had been promoted to SSgt.

The young SSgt did not realize it, but his life was about to have another significant change. During his tour in Utah, Dick met his wife to be, Katherine Vaccaria, at a Salt Lake City restaurant where she worked. In the fall of 1956, Dick and Katherine married in Elko, Nevada. Now, Dick had a wife and an 8-year old stepson, Steve Wilson.

Promotion to TSgt came on June 1, 1957, and along with the promotion came a permanent change of station move. Dick, Katherine and Steve packed up and shipped out to Marrakesh, Morocco. While at Sidi Slimane Air Base, Dick and Katherine's first son, Richard C. Etchberger, was born. Dick continued to excel in his work and in 1958 assumed increased responsibilities as a shift chief with the 12th Radar Bomb Scoring (RBS) Squadron.

The year 1959 started out with a bang for the

Etchbergers. Not only were Dick's career responsibilities expanding, his family was also growing. Dick and Katherine welcomed their second son, Cory. Even with the ever increasing job responsibilities, Dick made sure he found time for his family. Cory says as he got older, he remembers his dad finding time for various activities such as swimming and fishing with his three sons. As the 1960s began, Etchberger received orders to report to the 11th RBS Squadron located in Bismarck, North Dakota. The move went well, and Dick would be promoted to master sergeant by the end of the year.

With the new rank came a new job, Radar Maintenance Chief. As always, Dick excelled. Subordinates, peers and supervisors held him in high esteem and considered him the consummate professional. As fate would have it, his Commander, Captain Reeves, made a prophetic statement when he wrote, "MSgt Etchberger is the kind of NCO I would desire in my unit in combat."

The year 1963 brought happiness with Dick's promotion to SMSgt; however, 1964 brought pain and sorrow. Dick and Katherine suffered a major personal tragedy with the loss of a daughter during childbirth. Dick, Katherine and their family dealt with their tragic loss and moved forward.

In August 1965 the Etchberger family transferred to Clark Air Base, the Philippines. Again, Dick excelled, and his dedication to duty did not go unrecognized. By December 1966 he was the NCOIC of Communications and Electronics Maintenance with the 5th Tactical Control Maintenance Squadron.

In addition to normal responsibilities during his tour of duty at Clark Air Base, Dick was also the Communications-Electronics NCOIC of a large and very important Radar Control and Reporting Post deployed and installed on Hon Tre Island, Republic of Vietnam. He supervised the installation and checkout of two complex radar sets and the UHF, VHF, and HF communications equipment; the construction of both the Radar and Communications buildings; and the construction of a Maintenance Control Center facility. This monumental tasking turned into another Etchberger success story. On April 1,

1967, Etchberger was promoted to Chief Master Sergeant.

As in the past, promotion brought reassignment, this time to Chanute AFB, Illinois. At Chanute, Etchberger was the NCOIC of the Electronics Branch. However, this assignment would be extremely short-lived. Due to his outstanding reputation as a leader, and recognition as the leading authority in his speciality, he was about to be offered a very unusual and important assignment. This assignment was to a "Top Secret" United States Air Force/Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) project being developed and code-named "*Project Heavy Green*."

"*Project Heavy Green*" was formulated because the USAF's bombing missions against sites in North Vietnam at night, and especially during the monsoon season (October-April), were far from effective. Senior Air Force leadership believed the solution to this problem was the activation of radar sites closer to the border of North Vietnam. The theory was that radar site personnel could use computer-assisted radar to guide bomb-mission aircraft to their intended targets in North Vietnam.

This theory was based heavily on the knowledge of the radar equipment being used by the Strategic Air Command (SAC) at Barksdale AFB, Louisiana. This equipment could "see" at night and through bad weather by using mobile, computer-linked radar (MSQ-35) units at remote RBS detachments. The RBS detachment personnel tracked bomb-mission aircraft to a selected position then, with computer assistance, directed the aircrews to their bomb targets. The end result was that bombs were released on target despite poor weather or lighting conditions. Many top Air Force officials were convinced that having this equipment placed at remote radar sites close to North Vietnam was the solution to their bombing problems; therefore, they set out to implement "*Project Heavy Green*."

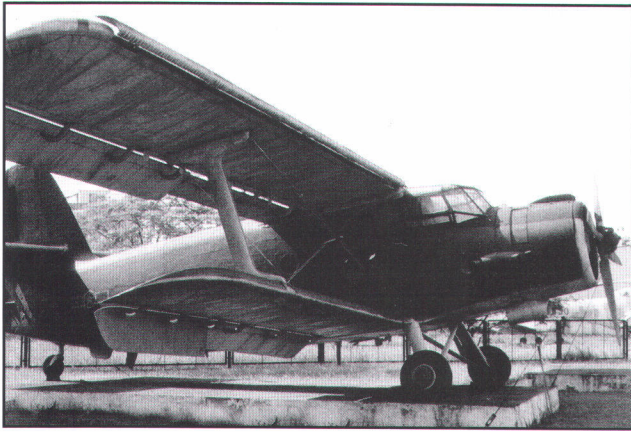
Etchberger was asked and agreed to become part of a special SAC radar bomb team being recruited and trained for a top secret mission in Laos. This team would have the distinction of being the first radar bomb unit in Laos. His brother Bob said, "Dick felt he was helping to stop the

spread of communism by going to southeast Asia, he didn't want his three boys growing up in a world run by communists."

The team Dick was assigned to was to be stationed at a place known as "Lima Site 85." "Lima Site" was the code name; "LS" was the acronym, and "85" was one of many small dirt or grass landing sites in Laos used by the CIA-controlled Air America Airlines. LS 85 was situated on top of the Phou Pha Thi mountain at an elevation of 4,500 feet and was only one of the many Lima Sites that would be involved in "*Project Heavy Green*." The site was located just 12 miles south of the North Vietnam border and, when established, would provide the U.S. radar unit a great radar view of targets in Hanoi, which was less than 140 miles away.

However, one major obstacle stood in the way of "*Project Heavy Green*." The Geneva Accords of 1962 declared Laos a neutral country. Therefore, it was illegal for either the United States or North Vietnam to have military forces in Laos. As a result, the men assigned to "*Project Heavy Green*" in Laos had to be civilian, not military personnel. Etchberger and the other Air Force personnel going to Site 85, had to "voluntarily" resign from the Air Force and become civilians. A contract was written and specified: "All military pay, allowances, privileges, and benefits normally due a military member or his dependents while the member is actively serving will be terminated." With Etchberger's signature on that contract, his family lost all the benefits associated with him being an active duty Air Force member. However, Dick and the other civilians would be well compensated by their new "employer."

These former airmen were now civilians and "*employees*" of the Lockheed Corporation. As *civilian employees*, they were not supposed to have any affiliation with the U.S. military and, therefore, wore no dog tags nor military uniforms and possessed no military identification cards. They even attempted to remove all USAF serial numbers from their equipment. No weapons were issued to them, and their protection, in case of attack, was to be provided by a small number of CIA-trained local Hmong tribesmen and Thai



The Soviet built Antonov AN-2 Colt was used by the People's Republic of Vietnam to attack Lima Site 85. Photo courtesy of T.V. News magazine "NOW."

Police Aerial Reinforcement Unit (PARU) personnel. These personnel were assigned to the mountain top as on-site security and were supposed to protect the "Lockheed employees" until they could be evacuated by Air America pilots and aircraft.

The only people who knew about this top secret mission were key Air Force and government officials, the men of the "*Project Heavy Green*" team and their spouses. Although the spouses knew of the mission and had been sworn to secrecy and informed that anyone speaking of the mission faced prosecution, they were not informed that their husbands would be going to Laos. Katherine Etchberger took the secrecy of the mission very seriously as evidenced by Cory Etchberger's statement that "Mom never told us anything she knew about '*Project Heavy Green*' until 1982 [when '*Project Heavy Green*' became declassified]."

After Dick accepted the assignment, and before departing for southeast Asia, he moved his wife and two youngest sons (19-year-old Steve was in the Air Force) to Hamburg, Pennsylvania, where his parents and brother lived. He hinted to his brother Bob about his new assignment. "He felt he could trust me because I had been in Naval Intelligence, so I knew how to keep my mouth shut. I still think he [Dick] had a premonition that something was going to happen to him. That's why he moved his family back to Hamburg before he left," said Bob.

Dick Etchberger and the other former Air

Force personnel, who were now "*civilians*" employed by the Lockheed Corporation, were assigned to the 1043rd Radar Evaluation Squadron, Bolling AFB, Washington, D.C. In reality, the "*Project Heavy Green*" team was at LS 85 in Laos. At LS 85, Dick served as a Radar Crew Chief for the men using the TSQ-81 ground-based radar system to direct bombing missions against North Vietnamese targets. From late October 1967 until March 10, 1968, the men at LS 85 aided General William W. "Spike" Momyer's 7th AF, by directing several hundred air strikes (totaling 1,463 sorties) against communist targets in North Vietnam. These bombing missions accounted for roughly 25 percent of all U.S. air attacks against North Vietnamese targets during the 4-month period.

Initially, it appeared the men atop the mountain had gone undetected by the North Vietnamese forces. This illusion was dispelled and military aviation history was made when the only recorded North Vietnamese air attack against U.S. troops during the Vietnam War occurred on January 12, 1968. The People's Republic of Vietnam (PRVN) used Soviet built Antonov AN-2 Colt biplanes to attack LS 85. "Four Colts were sent, although only two went over Site 85," said Dr. Timothy Castle, associate professor at the Air Force Air University's Air War College, and author of *One Day Too Long*, a book about the events surrounding "*Project Heavy Green*." The PRVN dropped converted 12mm mortar shells through tubes in the floors of the Colts. Although an estimated fifty mortar "bombs" were dropped, no serious damage was caused to LS 85 buildings or equipment. However, the bombing killed four Hmong (including two women) civilians and wounded two soldiers. The PRVN lost two of their "bombers" in the attack. To increase security after the aerial assault, the CIA installed a captured anti-aircraft gun at LS 85.

The air attack by the PRVN caused the U.S. Government to re-evaluate the security for LS 85. According to Dr. Castle, "Originally, the area was barbed wired and mined, plus there were approximately 1,000 CIA-controlled Hmong guerrillas at the base of the mountain for protection. That was

the state of site defenses when the men first arrived at Site 85." He went on to say, "The men were eventually issued M-16s, but the site was still thought to be secure enough, since it was on top of a mountain. CIA planners felt that helicopters could be quickly sent in to evacuate the men if needed."

As time went on, fewer and fewer of the LS 85-directed air strikes were against targets in North Vietnam, and more and more were against North Vietnamese forces in Laos. A total of 473 bombing sorties were flown around Pha Thi in February 1968. Of those 473 sorties, LS 85 personnel directed 157. Only 20 of those 157 sorties were directed against targets in North Vietnam. The other 137 bombing sorties directed by LS 85 personnel were against North Vietnamese troops in Laos, troops who were moving toward the LS 85 radar site.

It is apparent from a February 26, 1968, telegram from the U.S. Ambassador to Laos, William H. Sullivan, to USAF Chief of Staff, General John P. McConnell, that anxiety about the security of LS 85 was growing. The telegram read in part, "Enemy movements toward Site 85 have been inexorable over the past months. Neither air nor ground resources available to us appear adequate. You should be aware that we may be able to assure security of this site for no more than two weeks."

Although the decision to evacuate LS 85 personnel rested solely on Ambassador Sullivan's shoulders, General Momyer and other top U.S. military leaders exerted tremendous pressure on him to keep the site open. They reiterated the



The photo above depicts the Lima Site 85 buildings and equipment prior to the sapper attack. Photo courtesy of Ron Haden.

strategic importance of LS 85 and made it clear to Sullivan that the men at LS 85 must be evacuated only when the fall of the radar site was imminent. In only 13 days, the warning words of Sullivan's February 26 telegram would prove to be hauntingly accurate.

On the afternoon of March 10, 1968, Clarence F. "Bill" Blanton (former Air Force Lt Col and now "Lockheed employee" who was in charge of LS 85) and Dick Etchberger, attended a CIA security briefing about LS 85. The CIA assessment of the safety and security of LS 85, by case officers Howie Freeman and Woody Spence, was discouraging, and the outlook was dismal. Based upon recent increases of enemy troops in large numbers near the site, Freeman and Spence strongly recommended the 19 Americans be evacuated immediately from LS 85. However, due to the politics involved, Sullivan did not order the evacuation of the site.

At 6:00 p.m. that evening, a North Vietnamese mortar and B-40 rocket barrage began. Site 85 was under direct heavy attack from a large contingent of North Vietnamese forces. The defending Thai and Hmong forces, at the base of the mountain, were also under attack from more than 1,000 North Vietnamese troops. At this time, the men at the site did not know about the attack occurring at the base of the mountain between their security force and the North Vietnamese troops. They continued to mistakenly believe there was no way for the enemy to get up the 4,500 foot mountain to the radar site. By nightfall the living quarters on LS 85 were so badly damaged by mortars and rockets, they were uninhabitable. Etchberger, Stan Sliz (Controller), Henry "Hank" Gish (Radar Technician), John Daniel (Radio Operator), and Donald "Monk" Springsteadah (Radar Technician) decided to find a safe place to sleep outside. They took their sleeping bags, M-16s and survival radios down a path just south of the radar buildings. There, some of the men would spend the night on the side of a cliff while others slept nearby. The men still on duty remained inside the operations buildings.

At 2 a.m., on March 11, 1968, the five men near the cliff were awakened by the sound of

gun fire. A special North Vietnamese Sapper unit known as the "Dac Cong," had used ropes to climb up the cliff to the top of the mountain. These 26 Dac Cong troops entered the radar and operations buildings and began spraying AK-47 fire at anyone they saw. According to a 1996 North Vietnamese military history detailing the attack on Lima Site 85, the Dac Cong's orders were to "kill all the Americans they saw."

Less than ten minutes after descending a path and climbing into a "grotto-like" niche beneath a rock overhang, Etchberger and his four comrades saw a dozen Dac Cong troops coming down the path toward them.

Responding to direction by Sliz, Etchberger fired on the enemy intruders. Later, Sliz said, "This was probably when the Dac Cong first realized we were down there."

The Dac Cong troops quickly positioned themselves, so they could use gunfire and grenades against the trapped Americans. Gish was killed by the first burst of AK-47 fire. Next, Sliz and Daniel were hit in the legs by bullets and grenade shrapnel. Sliz said, "One grenade landed near Gish [body] and blew him in half. Another grenade blew him off the side of the mountain." Springsteadah was also killed. As the only man on the edge of the cliff still capable of firing his weapon, Etchberger kept the enemy troops at bay with his M-16.

Elsewhere on the site, Sgt Roger D. Huffman, a combat controller who had recently been assigned to site defense, had undergone a most difficult night but had bravely remained at his post and directed defensive air strikes around LS 85. As morning came, Huffman moved to the helipad where, under CIA case officer Freeman's direction, he directed air strikes on the guns and TSQ-81 radar sites.

At 7:35 a.m., an Air America UH-1 Huey helicopter pilot, former Army Captain Ken Wood, spotted survivors on the side of the cliff. Due to Etchberger's defense of their precarious position, Etchberger, Sliz and Daniel had miraculously survived through the night. Although it seemed nothing else was going their way, a thick, early-morning ground fog rolled in and helped conceal

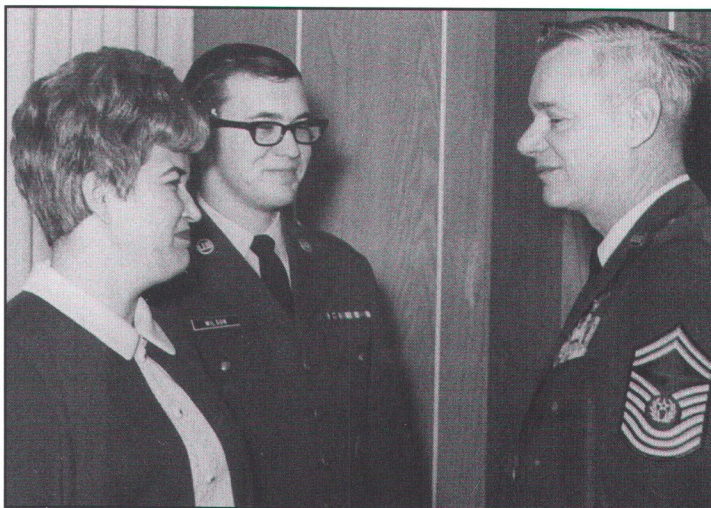
the American survivors as they prepared for extraction from the ledge by the helicopter crew. Etchberger assisted the semi-conscious Daniel onto the hoist seat, and the UH-1's flight engineer, L.M. "Rusty" Irons, hoisted Daniel up and into the helicopter. With Daniel aboard the Huey, Irons again lowered the seat to Etchberger, who then assisted Sliz into the seat. Irons brought Sliz into the helicopter and again returned the seat to Etchberger.

Just as Etchberger was about to be hoisted up, Bill Husband, a diesel mechanic who had been in hiding since escaping the Dac Cong's machine gun assault nearly six hours earlier, appeared from the brush. Etchberger grabbed onto Husband in bear-hug fashion, and Irons started hoisting them up together. With the men clinging together on the hoist seat beneath the helicopter, the Huey was strafed by enemy ground fire forcing the pilot to pull the Huey away from the ledge. Somehow, in spite of this violent maneuver, Irons managed to drag Etchberger and Husband into the helicopter. Suddenly a half dozen armor-piercing bullets tore through the helicopter floor, right beneath Etchberger. One of the bullets entered his lower body.

Ironically, until that instant, Etchberger, who had fought so tenaciously and had so heroically aided the rescue of his team, had survived untouched by enemy weapon's fire. Although the flight to Na Khang, Laos (Lima Site 36), was only 30 minutes, Etchberger's bleeding was so profuse, he lapsed into critical condition. The Huey touched down at LS 36 at 8:20 a.m., and the survivors were quickly transferred to an Air America C-123 Provider aircraft for the flight to Udorn Air Base, Thailand.

Former CMSgt Merkel A. Bailey, then a *civilian* "Kicker" (air freight specialist), was on the flight from Na Khang to Udorn. "CMSgt Etchberger was alive when they transferred him onto our C-123. We had to fly the wounded to Udorn because there were no medical staff or facilities at LS 36," declared Bailey. Bailey went on to say, "I wasn't a paramedic, but I tried to make him [Etchberger] and the other wounded men, as comfortable as possible. He never spoke. He was erratic and having some sort of seizures





CMSAF Paul Airey talk with Etchberger's wife Katherine and stepson A1C Steve Wilson.

part of the time.”

While Etchberger was en route to Nha Kang, Huffman and Spence were rescued from LS 85 by another Air America Huey. They were also transported to LS 36.

Meanwhile, Jerry Clayton (former AF Lt Col, then Lockheed employee), waited at Udorn Royal Thai AFB with medical help for Etchberger and the other wounded men. When the C-123 finally arrived around noon, Etchberger had passed away due to the excessive loss of blood. It is believed that the bullet hit an artery causing Etchberger to lose an enormous amount of blood and to eventually go into shock and die. Clayton said he found a pair of wire cutters in Etchberger's clutched hand. He believes Etchberger's intent was to go back to the site to complete the demolition of the radar equipment.

Shortly after the C-123 was unloaded at Udorn Air Base, Clayton visited the bedsides of Sliz and Daniel. There he learned about the heroic acts of his friend, Dick Etchberger. Both survivors told Clayton how Etchberger had bravely defended his fellow men time and again against the Dac Cong's intense assault, how he made sure the wounded men got aboard the Huey, and how he had grabbed onto Husband to bring him aboard the rescue helicopter. Etchberger's actions didn't surprise Clayton. Twelve Americans were either dead or missing in action. Only 7 of the 19 Americans at LS 85 on March 10, 1968, had survived. The fall of LS 85 was the largest single ground combat loss

of USAF personnel during the Vietnam War. The CIA-controlled Hmong guerrillas, in the village of Pha Thi at the base of the mountain, suffered heavy casualties. Without their sacrifice, the North Vietnamese troops would likely have reached LS 85's helipad; that would have most probably resulted in no survivors being rescued from LS 85.

Within a few days, Clayton made an extremely difficult and sad return to the states. He escorted Etchberger's body on its final trip home to Hamburg, Pennsylvania. A large funeral with full military honors awaited Chief Master Sergeant Richard (Dick) Loy Etchberger back in his hometown. "There were two busloads of military brass at the funeral," recalls Dick's brother Bob. "He was a hero and was given full military honors."

However, it is interesting to note that because details surrounding LS 85 were still classified "top secret," the family did not truly understand why there was such a turnout of senior military leaders at Etchberger's funeral, other than the fact that Dick was an outstanding NCO, leader and friend. Not only did Dick's family know little, few details were released to the loved ones of the other 11 Americans who were missing from LS 85. "All we knew was what was said in the local paper," recalled Cory Etchberger. "They said Dad had been killed in a helicopter accident in south-east Asia." Etchberger's was the only body of the twelve Americans who were killed or missing at LS 85 to ever be recovered.

It would be nine months after Etchberger's funeral before the family learned that Dick was to be posthumously decorated for his unselfish actions and dedication to his country and fellow man. In December 1968, as with everything else surrounding "*Project Heavy Green*," a secret ceremony was held at the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. In this secret ceremony, CMSgt Richard Loy Etchberger (deceased) was awarded the Air Force's second highest award for valor, the Air Force Cross. His wife, Katherine, accepted the award from General J. P. McConnell, Air Force Chief of Staff. Also present at the ceremony were Dick's three sons, Steve, Richard and Cory (who were 21, 11 and 9 years old respectively); Dick's parents; his brother, Bob; Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force (CMSAF) Paul W. Airey; future



The Etchberger Air Force Cross exhibit, at the AFEHRI, as seen on its dedication on May 12, 2000. Photo courtesy of AFEHRI.

CMSAF Donald L. Harlow; Lt Col Jerry Clayton and many general officers. Secrecy was still a must, and Dick's brother Bob, along with the rest of the Etchberger family, somehow managed to maintain their silence. Bob says, "It was real hard for me to keep Dick's Air Force Cross a secret for all those years."

Even as the years passed and the events surrounding "*Project Heavy Green*" became declassified, Dick's Air Force Cross was still not made public knowledge. Dr. Castle, the author of *One Day Too Long*, said, "When I was working on my book about LS 85, we discovered that the Air Force Cross was not on Dick's records. I feel it was a legitimate oversight by the Air Force." Thanks to Dr. Castle and the College for Enlisted Professional Military Education's Air Force Enlisted Heritage Research Institute (AFEHRI) at Maxwell AFB Gunter Annex, Alabama, the Chief's records were corrected. Finally in 1998, some 30 years after Etchberger's heroic and selfless actions on that mountaintop in Laos, the Air Force Cross awarded to CMSgt Richard L.

Etchberger became a matter of public record.

Chief Master Sergeant Richard (Dick) Loy Etchberger was not only a dedicated and outstanding senior NCO, but a truly compassionate and loving man. Perhaps most of all, he was a true patriot who believed in his country and paid the ultimate sacrifice in the fight for what Americans hold so dear, freedom. He didn't set out to be a hero – he set out to prevent the spread of communism, so that his children or future Americans would never feel the oppression of a communist state. CMSgt Richard Etchberger set out to do his job and, in so doing, became an American hero.

**Postscript:** On March 11, 1968, the day following the attack on Site 85, the USAF conducted an air strike using A-1 Sky Raiders and F-105 Thunder Chiefs in an attempt to destroy what remained of LS 85. Originally, there was a plan to establish a new Lima Site using the seven survivors of LS 85 supplemented with additional personnel. This never happened and, by the end of the summer of 1968, all the Lima Sites of "*Project Heavy Green*" were closed down.

Sadly, as with so many things surrounding the Vietnam War, no one wanted to take responsibility for the lack of action or faulty decision making. Ambassador William Sullivan and General "Spike" Momyer argued over which of them was responsible for the fall of LS 85. Eventually Sullivan stepped down as the Ambassador to Laos in March 1969.

Lt Col Jerry Clayton was promoted to Colonel in 1970 and worked at the Pentagon as a personnel officer until his retirement from the USAF on February 1, 1973. In 1994, 26 years after the fall of LS 85, Clayton returned to the Phou Pha Thi mountaintop in Laos, this time as a real civilian serving as an advisor to the NBC news team recording a story about "Lima Site 85."

Dick and Katherine's two sons, Rich and Cory, became college professors. Rich went on to teach students about Wildlife Management at Utah State University, while Cory taught Biology at Missouri's Longview College. Dick's stepson, Steve Wilson, separated from the Air Force in 1971 and went on to work for the United Parcel Service. Dick's wife, Katherine, who never



Contributing artist, John Witt, stands next to the scene he painted which depicts Etchberger in action. Photo courtesy of AFEHRI.

remarried, died on September 28, 1994.

The College for Enlisted Professional Military Education's AFEHRI Enlisted Heritage Hall at Maxwell AFB Gunter Annex, Alabama, maintains an exhibit to honor the valor of CMSgt Etchberger (Deceased). The exhibit depicts Laos' Phou Pha Thi mountain and a special mannequin in the likeness of Chief Etchberger. The Etchberger family generously donated the Chief's uniform along with the accouterments in which to dress the mannequin.

Also, Air Force Art Collection contributing artist, John Witt, painted a scene depicting Chief Etchberger in action. Finally, the Air Force Sergeants Association, Air Force Chiefs' groups, Senior NCO Academy students, and other groups and individuals joined together to donate funds to make the Enlisted Heritage Hall's special tribute to Chief Etchberger possible. The CMSgt Richard L. Etchberger exhibit was unveiled on May 12, 2000.

The Etchberger Air Force Cross exhibit has received several museum and history awards within the Air Force Museum system.

*“Stories of past courage ... can teach, they can offer hope, they can provide inspiration. But they cannot supply courage itself. For this each man must look into his own soul.”*

*(Profiles in Courage, 1956).*

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Members of the Etchberger Family





# AIRMEN MEMORIAL MUSEUM

Founded in 1986, the Airmen Memorial Museum stands as a tribute to enlisted airmen who have served in the U.S. Air Force, the Army Air Corps and the U.S. Army Air Forces.

Located in the Airmen Memorial Building, just eight miles from Washington, D.C., this museum is a showcase of accomplishments. It is also designed to function as a research and reference center that documents and preserves the contributions of men and women who served honorably but, until now, without a memorial or museum they could call their own.

The museum is open 8 a.m. until 5 p.m. weekdays and during specially scheduled events. For more information about the museum and its research projects, contact the Airmen Memorial Museum, toll-free, at 1-800-638-0594 or 301-899-3500.



The Airmen Memorial Museum  
5211 Auth Rd.  
Suitland, MD 20746