With the other members of his team dead or wounded, Etchberger held the enemy at bay with his M-16 rifle.

Etchberger's defense against the North Vietnamese sappers saved his companions, but he was mortally wounded on the rescue helicopter.

Etchberger, Medal of Honor

By John T. Correll

The 19 Americans on the mountain top in Laos were in grave danger. Most of them were technicians, operating a top secret radar site deep in what was effectively enemy territory, just 15 miles from the North Vietnam border. They were lightly armed, with only 10 M-16 rifles shared among them. The mountain—Phou Pha Thi, which rose almost 6,000 feet above the valley below—was defended by 1,000 Hmong irregulars and US airpower.

The drop on three sides was nearly vertical and the fourth side was fortified. The assumption was that it would be impossible for attackers to climb the sheer face of the mountain. On March 10, 1968, that proposition was about to be tested. A force consisting of between five and seven North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao battalions had the mountain surrounded.

The mountain was not impregnable after all. In the long night that followed, North Vietnamese sappers, covered by mortar, artillery, and rocket fire, scaled the perpendicular cliffs and overran the radar site. Only seven of the Americans got away alive, three of them because of the heroic actions of CMSgt. Richard L. Etchberger, who was himself killed during the last moments of the evacuation.

What happened at Lima Site 85 on Phou Pha Thi was shrouded in official secrecy for decades. It would be 42 years before Etchberger received full and public acknowledgment for saving the lives of his colleagues, but on Sept. 21, 2010, his three sons were presented the Medal of Honor, awarded posthumously to their father, by President Obama at the White House.

On the advice of the CIA, the US ambassador in Vientiane, who was head of the "Country Team" in Laos, had warned that the small contingent on the mountaintop could not hold out and proposed sending helicopters to extricate them. Seventh Air Force in Saigon, which depended on the radar to guide bombers over North Vietnam, disagreed and insisted that the site remain in operation unless "capture appeared imminent."

The radar site on the mountain was a secret because the Americans were not supposed to be there. By the terms of a 1962 Geneva agreement, Laos

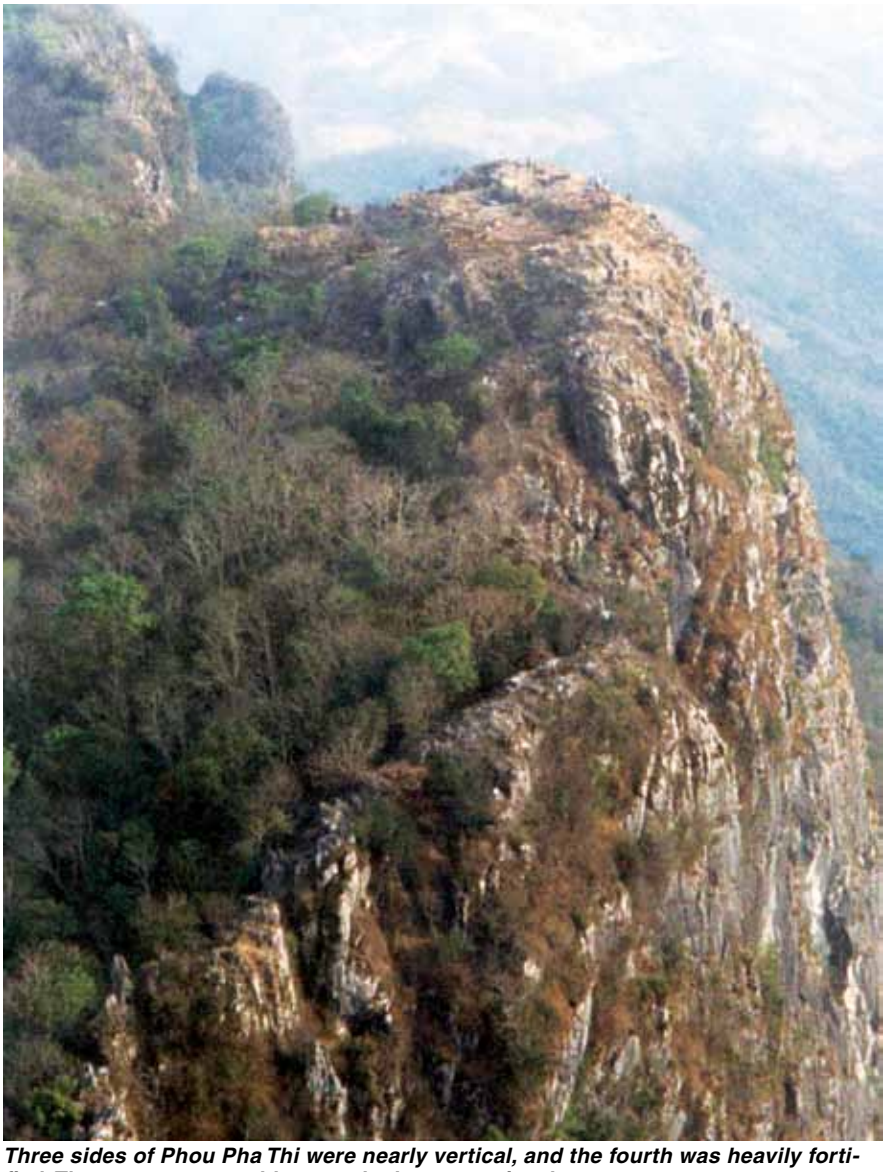
was neutral. No foreign troops were permitted.

The United States had withdrawn its forces. North Vietnam did not. But by 1968, both countries were again active in Laos, backing different sides in the ongoing civil war.

Sheep Dipped

The Air Force's Rolling Thunder air campaign against North Vietnam was severely hampered by bad weather, especially during the northeast monsoon between October and April. The Combat Skyspot radar bombing system offered a partial solution. It guided aircraft to a precise point in the sky from which ordnance could be released at predetermined coordinates.

The catch was that the Combat Skyspot radar had to be within 175 miles, line of sight, of the bomb drop point. Phou Pha Thi, one of the tallest



Three sides of Phou Pha Thi were nearly vertical, and the fourth was heavily fortified. The sappers were able to scale the mountain, above.

Photo via Etchberger family

In John Witt's painting for the Air Force Art Collection (l), an Air Force helicopter lifts wounded survivors off the cliff, while Etchberger (with M-16) directs the air support. Above: President Obama presents the Medal of Honor to Etchberger's three sons: (l-r) Steve Wilson, Cory Etchberger, and Richard Etchberger.

Etchberger was considered "one hell of an NCO" and "the consummate professional" by his crew.

mountains in Laos and 160 miles west of Hanoi, fit the bill. The Air Force already had a tactical air navigation system beacon there.

The mountain was known to airmen as Lima Site 85, after a rough landing strip on the southeastern flank, operated by the CIA's proprietary airline, Air America.

The Air Force could not openly deploy airmen to Lima Site 85 and it was unwilling to send them into Laos with fraudulent identities. If captured while pretending to be civilians, they would have no protection as prisoners of war under the Geneva Convention. It was decided that they would be—in the vernacular of covert operations—"sheep dipped." They would be discharged from the Air Force, hired by Lockheed Aircraft Service Corp., a subsidiary of Lockheed Aircraft, and go to Laos as employees. When their mission was over, they would be welcomed back into the Air Force.

The project was called Heavy Green. The teams to conduct the operation were drawn from the 1st Combat Evaluation Group, which ran the Strategic Air Command radar bomb scoring system, on which Combat Skyspot was based. Heavy Green would take over the TACAN as well. In September 1967, after listening to the classified briefing and offer, 48 Skyspot-qualified airmen and a dozen TACAN technicians signed the agreement. Their wives were briefed on the program—at least some of it—and sworn to secrecy.

The 44 enlisted Skyspot people and four officers selected all knew each other, having served together for years in SAC. Among them was Etchberger, 35, of Hamburg, Pa. His leadership abilities were evident early on.

Etchberger was president of his senior graduating class at Hamburg High School. He joined the Air Force in 1951 and qualified as a radar operator. During the 1960s, he was based at the 1st Combat Evaluation detachment at Bismarck, N.D., where he helped develop and improve the capabilities of the radar bomb scoring system. One of his officers at Bismarck had been Capt. Stanley J. Sliz, who was also chosen for Heavy Green. In April 1967, Etchberger was promoted to chief master sergeant, USAF's highest enlisted grade.

Eighteen Weeks

The installation team went in first, placing a TSQ-81 radar, a mobile variant of the Combat Skyspot system, and other facilities on the mountaintop in August. Living and working space at the site, which was only 150 feet long, was crowded with the radar, TACAN, operations vans, generator, bunkers, and metal huts.

The Heavy Green operators deployed to Udorn Air Base in northern Thailand in October, setting up shop in the Air America compound, although the airmen—now civilians—lived in rented housing off base. When at Udorn, they wore uniforms and carried military ID as a cover role. For their two-week rotational duty tours to the mountain, they wore civilian clothes and carried Lockheed ID. The boss, Col. Gerald H. Clayton, was manager of the Lockheed field services group at Lockheed.

Heavy Green did not completely cut ties with the Air Force. Clayton was also commander of Det. 1, 1043rd Radar Evaluation Squadron, which had headquarters at Bolling Air Force Base in Washington, D.C. The site was operational on Nov. 1.

The radar operators were divided into teams, one of them headed by Sliz, with Etchberger as crew chief. John G. Daniel was the board operator and the radar technicians were Donald K. Springsteadah and Henry G. Gish.

Etchberger "was one hell of an NCO," said Daniel, a sheep-dipped staff sergeant. "He knew the equipment. ... He knew how to handle people. ... He knew what to do and how to do it. You were eager to follow the man, to do what he wanted you to do." Sliz described Etchberger as "the consummate professional. He stood up above everybody else." In a letter to a friend back in the United States, Etchberger said, "I hate to be away from home, but I believe in the job. It is the most challenging job I'll ever have in my life."

Lima Site 85 was in northeastern Laos, the stronghold of the Communist Pathet Lao. Part of the security was the mountain itself. At the higher reaches, the sheer face of the cliffs rose at angles of 80 and 90 degrees on the north, south, and west sides. About 1,000 Hmong tribesmen, known as fierce fighters, and some Thai special forces were expected to hold the eastern slope.

The enemy had long since discovered the site and had made several attempts to dislodge it, including an attack by An-2 Colt biplanes using improvised munitions. US airpower was increasingly used to disperse enemy troops moving into the vicinity. A combat controller had been sent to direct local air strikes.

The US ambassador, William H. Sullivan, was opposed to arming Heavy Green personnel but, about a week before the attack in March, approved giving them a limited number of M-16s. The airmen had no real training with the weapons, only a general familiarization and the opportunity for some informal firing.

By March 10, the radar on Phou Pha Thi had been operational for 18 weeks. That day, a Sunday, mortar, artillery, and rocket rounds began falling on the mountaintop around 6 p.m. The barrage ceased at 7:45 p.m., but the Hmong were engaged in heavy fighting at lower elevations.

About 9 p.m., Ambassador Sullivan decided evacuation would begin the next morning, despite Air Force reluctance to close the site. There were 19 Americans on the mountain: 16 Heavy Green operators and support personnel, a combat controller, and two CIA paramilitary officers.

After the initial shelling, Sliz's team went to get some rest while another team took the duty. Around 8 p.m., Daniel

and Springsteadah took their sleeping bags and went down to a ledge on the western slope, which was less exposed to bombardment than their quarters. The ledge was about 20 feet below the top of the mountain. A path led down to it, but beyond that, the mountain dropped sharply for several thousand feet. Sliz, Etchberger, and Gish remained in the vicinity of the vans.

During the night, a North Vietnamese sapper team that had trained for months for the mission climbed the western slope, the one unguarded by the Hmong, and reached the summit. The sappers waited in hiding until 3 a.m., then began moving toward the Heavy Green facilities. Detected by a guard, they opened fire.

"As the technicians came running out of the operations structure, they were met with a hail of small-arms weapons fire from close range," a subsequent Air Force report said. Several Americans were killed, including the leader of the radar team on duty.

Awakened by the shooting, Sliz, Etchberger, and Gish made their way down the path and joined Daniel and Springsteadah on the ledge.

Five or six of the enemy began walking down the trail. Etchberger, at the direction of Sliz, opened up on them with his M-16 and they retreated. For reasons unknown, the enemy did not press the attack down the path, but brought the ledge under fire with small arms and grenades from the top of the cliff. Gish was killed in the first burst of fire, and Springsteadah shortly thereafter. Sliz and Daniel were struck by shrapnel and bullets. A rocky overhang, about five feet deep and five feet wide, offered some protection. Two people could squeeze underneath it.

The Americans on the ledge had only three M-16s. Sliz took Gish's rifle when Gish was killed. They had plenty of ammunition, though, having taken along a box of extra clips. They also had signal flares and a survival radio, which were in Sliz's survival vest.

The sappers continued tossing grenades from the top of the cliff. Sliz and Daniel had limited mobility, but were able to knock some of the grenades away. "If I could reach them, I'd pick them up and throw them back on top of the hill," said Daniel. "If I couldn't reach them, I'd take the butt of my rifle and kick them off over the edge of the mountain." When one grenade landed outside their reach, Daniel and Sliz rolled the body of a dead comrade on top of it.

Sliz and Daniel, weakened by loss of blood, were not able to help much with the defense, but the attackers "weren't able to get closer because of Etch firing at them," said Sliz.

"Despite having received little or no combat training, Chief Etchberger single-handedly held off the enemy with an M-16, while simultaneously directing air strikes into the area and calling for air rescue," said the citation to Etchberger's Medal of Honor. "Because of his fierce defense and heroic and selfless actions, he was able to deny the enemy access to his position and save the lives of his remaining crew."

Etchberger Bars the Way

Etchberger kept the sappers at bay until help arrived at daybreak. Two A-1 Skyraiders from Nakhon Phanom Air Base on the Thai border roared over the mountain, strafing the North Vietnamese. That had limited effect, but on the next pass, they dropped cluster bombs, which cleared the area momentarily.

A Huey helicopter from the Air America base at Long Tieng approached, hovered, and dropped a jungle penetrator with rescue slings in which the survivors could ride.

Of the five men who had taken shelter on the ledge, only Etchberger remained untouched by enemy fire. He had repeatedly exposed himself to hostile fire, both while holding the enemy back and as he placed his wounded teammates on the hoist. He sent Daniel up first, then loaded Sliz on the lift when it came back down. The cable, swaying in the wind, banged Sliz against the side of the cliff, but he was still conscious when the helicopter crew pulled him aboard.

At that point, Bill Husband, the generator repairman, came running. He was in bad shape with hip-to-head shrapnel wounds, but Etchberger got him on the lift. As Husband and Etchberger rose up together on the third hoist, the helicopter began taking fire from below.

After they climbed aboard the Huey, one of the rounds punched through the floor of the helicopter and hit Etchberger, who was sitting on the jump seat of the helicopter. He died minutes later.

Between them, the Air America and USAF helicopters brought out seven US survivors and some of the Thai and Hmong wounded. The other 12 Americans were known or presumed to be dead. About 30 of the Hmong and Thai were killed.

Twenty days after the attack, the White House declared a bombing halt north of the 20th parallel, which included the part of North Vietnam into which Lima Site 85 had been directing strikes.

Etchberger was nominated for the Medal of Honor by CMSgt. Frank Roura, first sergeant and chief of admin for the 1043rd Radar Evaluation Squadron at Udorn. Numerous accounts blame President Lyndon Johnson for

CMSgt. Richard Etchberger at Udorn Air Base in Thailand, a few months before the firefight at Lima Site 85.

downgrading the award, but the decision was made by Gen. John D. Ryan, the Air Force vice chief of staff, who was the USAF approving authority for top awards. In a letter to *Air Force* Magazine in 2006, retired Col. Ruffin W. Gray, who was Ryan's executive officer in 1968, explained what happened:

"After reading all the supporting documentation, I went into General Ryan's office and told him that as far as I was concerned, this had every element for the Congressional Medal of Honor rather than the Air Force Cross," Gray said. "After reading all the supporting documents, General Ryan said that he agreed. However, we had to consider that the Congressional medal could not be awarded without national news attention. Due to the sensitivity of Lima Site 85's location, the circumstances surrounding its role, and the subsequent loss, these factors could not be revealed. We could, however, fly the Etchberger family to Washington and in a quiet, appropriate ceremony award the Air Force Cross without national fanfare."

Etchberger's records were supposed to be flagged and reviewed periodically so that when circumstances permitted, "the Air Force Cross could be rescinded and the Congressional medal awarded," Gray said, but "it must have fallen through a crack somewhere along the line."

The Air Force Cross was awarded posthumously to Etchberger in a closed presentation at the Pentagon Jan. 15, 1969. His name did not appear on a public list of Air Force Cross recipients until reported in *Air Force* Magazine in 1998. Catherine Etchberger was sworn to secrecy. She kept the promise, not even telling her sons what had been revealed to her. "We were told that he died in a helicopter crash," said Cory Etchberger, who was nine when his father was killed. "Our mother knew what really happened." Catherine Etchberger, who never remarried, died in 1994.

The Heavy Green personnel were restored to active duty. After US involvement in the war in Laos was revealed in 1970, the families were told more, but not all, of the details of the night on the mountain. The cover story was maintained for years. The saga of Lima Site 85 emerged in bits and pieces between 1977 and 1995 as information from various documents and reports was declassified. The most extensive account was in 1999 by Timothy N. Castle in his book, *One Day Too Long*.

USAF photo by Andy Morataya

L-r: CMSAF James Roy, Secretary of the Air Force Michael Donley, Cory Etchberger, and Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Norton Schwartz display a framed copy of Etchberger's Medal of Honor citation at the Pentagon Hall of Heroes induction ceremony.

The title came from Ambassador Sullivan's cable of March 11, 1968, to Secretary of State Dean Rusk in which he said, "It appears we may have pushed our luck one day too long in attempting to keep this facility in operation."

Finally, the Medal of Honor

Retired MSgt. Robert L. Dilley had never known Etchberger, but he had served with the 1st Combat Evaluation Group in Bismarck, N.D., the unit from which Etchberger departed to join the Heavy Green program. In 2004, he wrote to Rep. Earl Pomeroy (D-N.D.), in whose district Etchberger had served. Daniel, Sliz, and the Heavy Green commander, Clayton, provided supporting information.

Pomeroy got language into the 2009 defense authorization bill to waive the limit on how much time could elapse before the award of a Medal of Honor. The bill, adopted by Congress and signed by President Bush in 2008, "authorized and requested" the President to award the Medal of Honor to Etchberger.

After a favorable USAF personnel board review, Secretary of the Air Force Michael B. Donley nominated Etchberger for the higher award.

President Obama telephoned Cory Etchberger July 7, 2010, to tell him the Medal of Honor had been approved.

The Medal of Honor was awarded at the White House to Etchberger's three sons: Richard Etchberger of Vernal, Utah, Cory Etchberger of Schwenksville, Pa., and Steve Wilson of Redlands, Calif. Also there was Chief Etchberger's brother, Robert Etchberger, 81, of Summerfield, Fla.

The next day at the Pentagon, Etchberger was inducted into the Hall of Heroes. "Valor has no expiration date," Gen. Norton A. Schwartz, Air Force Chief of Staff, said at the induction. "The discovery of truth, no matter how long it is delayed, sets the record straight."

John Daniel, 71, who now lives in La Junta, Colo., came to Washington for the award ceremonies. The other survivor from the ledge, Stanley Sliz, 78, lives in Huntington Beach, Calif., but was unable to make the trip.

Both Daniel and Sliz still carry shrapnel from Lima Site 85. Both think often of Etchberger.

"He should have a 55-gallon drum full of medals. I wouldn't be alive without him," Daniel said, but "42-plus years too goddamn late. It should have happened 42-plus-years ago." ■

John T. Correll was editor in chief of Air Force *Magazine for 18 years and is now a contributing editor. His most recent article, "The Atomic Mission," appeared in the October issue. For additional information, see "The Fall of Lima Site 85" in the April 2006 issue.*