

Flight engineer earns Pitsenbarger award for heroism

5/10/2005 - **RANDOLPH AIR FORCE BASE, Texas (AFP)** -- For his display of heroism in the face of hostile enemy fire, a helicopter flight engineer from Hurlburt Field, Fla., has been named the 2005 Pitsenbarger award winner.

Master Sgt. Robert Colannino Jr. was a flight engineer aboard an MH-53M Pave Low during a night resupply mission when his helicopter was struck by a rocket-propelled grenade.

The grenade struck the nose of the helicopter and exploded inside the cockpit between the two pilots and Sergeant Colannino. The three crewmembers were significantly injured from shrapnel and debris, but the other flight engineer, sitting below the overhead control panel, received the most significant injuries and became incapacitated.

The pilot found an open field and landed the badly crippled aircraft. Sergeant Colannino then sprang into action with his weapon in hand to defend the aircraft and crew. When he heard his fellow engineer's cry for help, Sergeant Colannino lowered the back of his seat, released his restraining belt and pulled the engineer out of the cockpit into the cabin to assess his injuries.

He administered first aid to his fellow crewmember and then focused his attention on the other crewmembers' injuries. He helped one of the pilots get out of his seat because his eye injury interfered with his vision.

Sergeant Colannino then heard the aircraft commander shout that he needed help shutting down the aircraft. The sound of the helicopter was drawing the enemy to their position. The enemy was almost on their position and mortar rounds were beginning to fall when Sergeant Colannino remembered that fuel cables ran the length of the cabin. He found the cables and pulled them to stop the engines. His actions stopped the rotor and allowed the crew and team to escape.

Sergeant Colannino carried the injured flight engineer to safety on a rescue aircraft and continued first aid until they landed safely.

The Air Force Sergeant's Association gives the Pitsenbarger award annually to an enlisted Airman for heroic acts, on or off duty, that save a life or prevent serious injury. Its namesake, Airman 1st Class William H. Pitsenbarger, was posthumously promoted in 2000 when his Air Force Cross was upgraded to the Medal of Honor. Sergeant Pitsenbarger was awarded the Medal of Honor for treating and protecting scores of wounded infantrymen -- while under intense enemy fire and being mortally wounded himself -- near the Vietnamese capital of Saigon in 1966.
(Courtesy of Air Force Personnel Center News Service)