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At All Costs

Matt Proietti

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The remarkable true story of a career GI’s leading role in a secret radar mission, the resolve he demonstrates during an attack on his mountaintop camp—-and the 42-year quest for America to recognize his actions.

In 1967, after 16 years in uniform, Air Force Chief Master Sgt. Dick Etchberger is starting to make plans for a post-military life when he is invited to participate in a clandestine Vietnam War mission. There’s a catch, though: he must accept the assignment before he’s told of the location. Etchberger quickly agrees to this condition and is sent to Southeast Asia with two dozen other Air Force technicians to run a secret radar site atop a remote peak.

Posing as civilian contract workers, the men use an early computer to direct pilots to hit targets with greater accuracy regardless of visibility. Their operation, Project Heavy Green, has the blessing of the highest levels of Washington, D.C., as President Lyndon B. Johnson hopes improved bombing results will coax North Vietnam to negotiate an end to the war.

The mission is initially successful, though the team’s presence on the mountain is known almost immediately. The enemy soon launches a bizarre aerial assault on the camp. It is largely ineffective. A later ground attack, however, is not and results in the Air Force’s greatest loss of ground personnel in the war. Etchberger’s actions lead to the survival of three men, but not his own.

With eyewitnesses to Etchberger’s courage, why did it take four decades for the U.S. to recognize him with the nation’s highest award for military valor? Because they took place in Laos, a country officially neutral toward the neighboring war and off-limits to outside forces. Presenting him the Medal of Honor was impossible as it would have exposed U.S. presence there. It would take decades—and an improbable pathway—to reach this objective.

So begins the second phase of this remarkable story.

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