



# GENERAL HENRY H. ARNOLD EDUCATION GRANT

in honor of

## CHIEF MASTER SERGEANT RICHARD L. ETCHBERGER



Richard L. "Dick" Etchberger joined the Air Force in 1951, shortly after graduating from Hamburg High School in Pennsylvania. He dreamed of becoming a pilot, but a head injury from high school sports proved problematic during pilot training. Instead, he was trained as a radio and radar maintenance specialist.

By 1967, Chief Master Sergeant Etchberger was considered an authority in his field of electronics and was among a group of airmen hand-picked for a classified mission: to operate covert radar installations in Laos and guide U.S. bombers to sites in North Vietnam. Since American troops were not supposed to be in neutral Laos, Chief Etchberger and the other technicians had to resign their commissions and become civilian employees of Lockheed Aircraft Services. Chief Etchberger and his team operated Lima Site 85 atop a Laotian cliff from November 1967 to March 1968.

In the early morning hours of 11 March 1968, North Vietnamese soldiers launched an attack that killed most of the operating team. With 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. Because of his fierce defense and selfless actions, he was able to deny the enemy access to his position and save the lives of some of his crew.

With the arrival of the rescue aircraft, Chief Etchberger, once again deliberately risked his own life numerous times, exposing himself to heavy enemy fire in order to load three of his colleagues into a rescue sling and to safety. As the helicopter was flying away, it was struck by armor-piercing ground fire. One round hit and killed Chief Etchberger. He was 35 years old.

Chief Etchberger's heroism that day earned him the posthumous award of the Air Force Cross. A recommendation that he also receive the Medal of Honor was denied due to the highly classified nature of the mission. Chief Etchberger's wife Catherine, sworn to secrecy about the Lima Site mission, kept her silence until it was declassified in 1982, fourteen years after her husband's death. It was then that Etchberger's sons learned the truth of their father's fate, having been previously told that he died in a helicopter crash.

Forty years later, Secretary of the Air Force Michael Donley nominated CMSgt Etchberger for the U.S. military's highest decoration, which is awarded "for conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of life above and beyond the call of duty." President Obama approved the Medal of Honor and presented it to Chief Etchberger's sons; Cory Etchberger, Richard Etchberger and Steve Wilson at a White House ceremony September 21, 2010.

