

# The Last Full Measure (2019)



Pistenbarger (rt) helped save several dozen lives in Vietnam. (c) Roadside Attractions

Todd Robinson's *The Last Full Measure* includes combat scenes, but it is not your usual war movie. Instead it is about the aftermath of the Vietnam War, dealing with a 30 year long attempt by veterans to obtain the Congressional Medal of Honor they fervently believe their heroic comrade William Pitsenbarger deserves. It is also a depiction of the cruel after effects of war upon men who have done and seen too many horrific things.

Scott Huffman ([Sebastian Stan](#)) is a civilian bureaucrat at the Pentagon when former Sgt. Tom Tulley (William Hurt), an aged Vietnam vet who served as a medic, shows up in Washington DC in a 30-year long quest to secure an upgrade from the Air Force Cross that the deceased pararescue medic William Pitsenbarger received. He and his buddies have always believed Pistenbarger should have received the Medal of Honor instead.

Huffman balks at being assigned to look into the matter, especially in light of his moving on to another higher level position. "There's nothing in this for me," he says. However, once he goes off to interview some of the men saved during what was called Operation Abilene, the desk jockey meets with Billy (Samuel L. Jackson), Jimmie (the late Peter Fonda), Ray

(Ed Harris) and Kepper (John Savage). All have been damaged by the bloody engagement in which their unit suffered a casualty rate of 80%. Jimmy suffers so much from PTSD that he cannot sleep at night. None of the men, being in the Army, knew Pistenbarger, but they had witnessed his incredible courage under fire so intense that a few of their comrades laid on the ground frozen by terror.

There are frequent flashbacks to the Vietnam jungle where the American soldiers have stumbled upon the jungle bunkers serving as a Viet Cong headquarters. Snipers in trees and machine gun squads and scores of VC flitting through the bush rake the soldiers with gun fire, wounding their medic as well as killing and wounding dozens of others.

Pistenbarger, in a helicopter a hundred feet or so above the battle, notes that the wounded marine they hoist up is their medic, so he decides to drop down to take his place. During the next few hours he tends to the wounded and the dying. As the VC close in he picks up a gun to help defend their tiny patch of land, eventually helping to save some sixty wounded men. His crew above signal him to come up before it is too late, but he waves them off. He does not know any of the soldiers. They are Marines and he is Air Force, but they need him and he is not about to leave them. And so he pays, in President Lincoln's words from his Gettysburg Address, "the last full measure," cut down by an enemy sniper.

Scott Huffman begins his quest for Pistenbarger's just due as an unwanted chore, but he changes along the way to ardent champion willing to make career sacrifices himself. This is due not only to the stoic determination of the vets, but also to his becoming acquainted with Frank and Alice Pitsenbarger, the dead medic's parents, played with deep conviction by Diane Ladd and Christopher Plummer. To add urgency to Huffman's quest, Frank has terminal cancer, holding on only by the hope that he will see their son honored. Bradley Whitford is on hand as Carlton Stanton, a senior Pentagon official who offers Huffman a cushy higher paying position if he will walk away from the quest. The film is a bit murky at first as to why young Pitsenbarger was given the lesser honor rather than the CMH. There is a hint that inter-service rivalry may have played a part: of the 3,500 service members who have been singled out for extraordinary acts of valor in combat, only a hand full have been Air Force members. Also that poor planning, and a then Army colonel who is now a Congressman are factors. How this all comes to a moving climax in Dayton Ohio's US Airforce Museum (my favorite tourist site to conduct visitors to) makes for powerful viewing.

The film could have been vastly improved if we had seen more of the hero than just the flashback combat scenes. Actor Jeremy Irvine has very little dialogue in the battle scenes in which he exposes himself to enemy fire while tending to the wounds of the hurt and dying. This 21-year-old Pararescueman had made over 250 missions during the 8 months he had been in Vietnam, so it would have been easy to work in a few scenes revealing more than just a concerned medic of great courage. Instead, the film focuses more on the Pentagon lawyer Scott Huffman who risks his career to get the man his due—and this brings up the deepest flaw in the film. I wondered when my Google attempts to discover more about his brave lawyer who seemed to be taking the spotlight away from the medic that I was turning up "No results." Eventually the review in Newsday revealed that this is a made up character! What a let down, that the story of a genuine hero should be enclosed in a fictional one, as if the filmmakers are saying that real-life risk and courage are not enough, that they have to be supplemented by a fictional story of a civilian who risks getting a better job if he persists in his present quest.

Despite this deep flaw, there are some genuine moments of drama that involve both the medic and his parents. In one scene Mrs. Pistenbarger explains why she blessed their young son going to Vietnam by saying, "If not my son, whose?" The film does not get into the politics of the Vietnam War. Surprisingly, none of the veterans say anything about the rightness of the war, though reference is made to the lies that President Johnson and General Westmoreland told about their supposedly winning it. The film's focus is narrow (and on the wrong person!), just on the besieged men in that dangerous jungle. Viewers themselves can provide the larger picture, perhaps after watching Ken Burns' great documentary series on the War. Apart from that, the film provides a good example of what Jesus words about "no one has greater love than this..." William Pistenbarger, not quite 22 years old when he died on that April night in 1966, giving his life for men he did not even know, like those soldiers buried at the cemetery consecrated by President Lincoln, paid that "last full measure

*This review will be in the February issue of VP along with a*

*set of questions for reflection and/or discussion. If you have found reviews on this site helpful, please consider purchasing a subscription or individual issue in The Store.*