

Among Ypsilanti's Finest

The Life and Legacy of Medal of Honor Recipient
Lt. Col. Charles Seymour Kettles

BY CONNOR K. ASHLEY

"With all due respect to John Wayne, he couldn't do what Chuck Kettles did."

– President Barack Obama

Interviewing a Hero

On the morning of November 15, 2005, United States Army veteran, Eastern Michigan University alum, and longtime Ypsilanti resident Charles Kettles sat down at his kitchen table to record a video history of his experiences in the U.S. Army.

An American flag was to his left, intentionally placed nearby. Bill Vollano of the Ypsilanti Rotary Club was sitting across the table from Charlie. Vollano had been volunteering his time to record oral histories of veterans for the Veterans' History Project of the Library of Congress. As the interview began, Kettles settled into his signature matter-of-fact speaking style, recounting his time serving at military installations both in the U.S. and abroad. Right before the video's twenty-minute mark, Ann Kettles can be heard interrupting, saying to her husband, "Hey, Charlie, be sure to get around to telling them about the fifteenth of May." Ann was referring to May 15, 1967, when her husband led the airborne rescue of over forty U.S. Army soldiers under serious threat by North Vietnamese forces in a riverbed west of Duc Pho in South Vietnam. Kettles turned to his wife, calmly replying, "Ann, I'll get to it."

Over the forty minutes that remained, Lieutenant Colonel Kettles described one of the most significant acts of American heroism of the Vietnam War. Before leaving, Vollano asked if he could take some documents and a map from Kettles, in order to do more research.

Following the interview, Bill Vollano, the Congressional offices of first John and then Debbie Dingell, and many other influential Ypsilantians lobbied hard for Charlie

Kettles to be awarded the Medal of Honor for his extreme bravery on that long-ago day in May. It would take nearly a decade, but their efforts finally paid off. In July 2016, retired Lieutenant Colonel Charles Seymour Kettles traveled to Washington, D.C., for a ceremony at the White House, where he would be lauded as one of the finest to have ever called the city of Ypsilanti home.



Retired Lt. Col. Charles Kettles receiving the Medal of Honor from President Barack Obama, 2016 (Photo: Office of the White House Press Secretary)

From Humble Beginnings

Charles Seymour Kettles was born on January 9, 1930, to Grant and Cora Kettles in Ypsilanti, Michigan, where he would live for much of his life. Kettles received his high school diploma from the Edison Institute at Greenfield Village, in nearby Dearborn. After graduating, he enrolled in the Michigan State Normal College (now Eastern Michigan University) in his hometown.

In 1951, just two years into his college career, Kettles was drafted into the United States Army. After completing basic training at Camp Breckinridge, Kentucky, Kettles attended Officer Candidate School at Fort Knox, Kentucky, where he was commissioned in the U.S. Army Reserve, in February 1953. By the end of 1953, Kettles had also graduated from Army Aviation School. From 1954 to 1956, Kettles was deployed in Korea, Japan, and Thailand. Following this, Kettles decided to retire from active duty, remaining in the army reserve, and eventually opening a Ford dealership with his brother Dick in DeWitt, Michigan.

However, as the war in Vietnam continued to escalate and the need for army aviators increased, Kettles volunteered for active duty in 1963. After training to learn to operate the UH-1D "Huey" helicopter, in 1965, Kettles was deployed to Vietnam for tours of service, in 1967, and from 1969 to 1970. It is for events during this 1967 deployment that Charles Kettles would be awarded the Distinguished Service Cross and later the Medal of Honor.

Acts of Valor

On the morning of May 15, 1967, members of the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, came under intense enemy attack by North Vietnamese forces while traversing the Song Tra Cau riverbed west of Duc Pho, Vietnam. After hearing of the besieged soldiers, Kettles volunteered to lead a mission of the 176th Aviation Company to evacuate the wounded and bring needed reinforcements to the quickly deteriorating riverbed position. North Vietnamese Army forces in overwhelming numbers engaged in a highly disciplined attack against both the positions of the 101st Airborne units on the ground and the incoming Huey helicopters of the 176th Aviation Company that were making their way into a "hot" landing zone.

After completing one successful flight into Song Tra Cau, Kettles returned his aircraft to the staging area in Duc Pho to retrieve more reinforcements to fly back with him to the battlespace. Knowing what serious fire his aircraft was likely to come under, then Major Kettles nevertheless set out to return to the landing zone, disregarding his own personal safety. While landing his aircraft in the Song Tra Cau riverbed for the second time, his helicopter was seriously damaged by heavy arms and mortar fire that also severely wounded his door gunner. After loading as many wounded soldiers onto his aircraft as possible, it became clear that his helicopter had suffered significant damage and was actively leaking fuel. However, even with fuel leaking from his aircraft and still under intense enemy fire, Kettles safely flew the helicopter back to the staging area.

Several hours later, the order was given to immediately rescue the remaining forty-four U.S. personnel in the Song Tra Cau riverbed. Forty of the men were members of the 101st Airborne and the remaining four were members of Kettles's own 176th Aviation Company, whose helicopter had been destroyed. With only one remaining flyable helicopter in the 176th, Kettles volunteered to take that aircraft and lead a team of five other helicopters of the 161st Aviation Company to complete the mission. This would be Major Kettles's third landing that day in the Song Tra Cau riverbed.

After the other helicopters touched down at the landing zone and successfully retrieved the soldiers on the ground, Major Kettles received a report that all U.S. personnel had been recovered. Kettles then began to return to the staging area at Duc Pho as the lead aircraft. Before this, his aircraft had not been needed to carry any of the soldiers. As he was leaving the battlespace, he learned that the first report was incorrect and that

eight army personnel were still engaged on the ground with the enemy. These soldiers had been holding off enemy forces to enable others to be rescued.

With complete disregard for his own safety, Kettles transferred command of the airmobile detachment to another officer and immediately returned to the landing zone to rescue the remaining eight men. By then all the other aircraft had left the battlespace, and Kettles and his helicopter would be the only target in an open riverbed for an entire battalion of North Vietnamese combatants. Adding to the difficulty of his situation was that putting eight men in his helicopter would make it too heavy for takeoff. As he landed, Kettles was confronted with small arms fire, automatic rifle fire, mortar shells, and an artillery barrage. This damaged the tail of his helicopter and its main rotor blade and blew out both of his front windshields. Kettles later said it made for "in-flight air conditioning."

Once all eight men were onboard, Kettles now had to find a way to get his helicopter off the ground. Unable to take off like a traditional helicopter, Kettles moved it quickly across the dry riverbed, dragging the aircraft as if he was taking off in an airplane, until gaining enough speed to achieve lift. Because of his actions that day, all forty-four men were successfully evacuated out of Song Tra Cau.

For his three trips as commanding officer, on May 15, 1967, into a hostile landing zone while piloting two severely damaged helicopters, Kettles was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, in 1968. Kettles later served a second tour in South Vietnam from October 1969 to October 1970.

Honoring a Great Man

After retiring from active-duty service for the second time, Lieutenant Colonel Charles Kettles remained in the army reserve in San Antonio, Texas, where he taught airmobile combat readiness for army aviators. After finally retiring from his duties with the army reserve, in 1978, Charlie and Ann returned to Ypsilanti, where they would spend the rest of their lives. Charlie was active in Kiwanis and the Veterans of Foreign Wars, Post 2408. He also served as a Republican on Ypsilanti's city council, typically populated by Democrats. Kettles was also the founder and an instructor in the Aviation Management Program in the College of Engineering and Technology at his alma mater, Eastern Michigan University.

Following that 2005 oral history with Bill Vollano, years of effort ensued to gain more recognition for the astonishing actions of Charlie Kettles on May 15, 1967, on a Vietnam battlefield. Thanks to the hard work of Congresswoman Debbie Dingell and her staff, a special act of Congress was passed to extend the time limit for awarding the Medal of Honor, specifically for Charlie Kettles to qualify.

On July 18, 2016, hundreds of family members, friends, and honored guests attended the award ceremony at the White House, where retired Lieutenant Colonel Charles

Seymour Kettles was awarded the Medal of Honor, by President Barack Obama. As President Obama said in his opening remarks at the award ceremony: “Nobody deserves [the Medal of Honor] more than Charles Kettles of Ypsilanti, Michigan. Many believe that . . . except for Chuck.” Kettles lived his values of humility and dignity, even while receiving the Medal of Honor from the president of the United States. Several of the men that were saved on May 15, 1967, were in attendance that day and stood during the ceremony to honor Charlie Kettles for rescuing them and saving their lives. Many of the men stressed that they would not have had families were it not for Kettles and, thus, countless people owed their lives to him.

Charles Seymour Kettles died on January 21, 2019, at his home in Ypsilanti. Ann Kettles followed him a year later, on January 9, 2020. They are both buried in Highland Cemetery, in their beloved Ypsilanti.

After continued advocacy for the life and legacy of Charles Kettles, Congresswoman Debbie Dingell ushered through a bill in Congress to rename the Ann Arbor VA Medical Center after Charlie Kettles. Following that act of Congress, on January 5, 2021, the facility officially became the Lieutenant Colonel Charles S. Kettles Medical Center, in his honor. An official award ceremony was held June 18, 2021, where many speakers spoke of the life and service of Kettles.

Charles Kettles served his country with distinction and bravery and was awarded the country’s highest military honor. His legacy of heroism is a lesson for all residents of Ypsilanti and the state of Michigan, and for every American as well. In the fifty years since Ypsilanti’s sesquicentennial, no citizen of our city has been more worthy of emulation than Charlie Kettles. May he be remembered as among the finest citizens of Ypsilanti in its long and storied two-hundred-year history.



Charles Kettles, 2019 (Photo: *EMU Today*)

A Note on Sources

Information for this essay comes from “Medal of Honor: Lieutenant Colonel Charles Kettles, Biography” (<https://www.army.mil/medalofhonor/kettles/>), “Lieutenant Colonel Charles S. Kettles VA Medical Center, (<https://www.vva310.org/lieutenant-colonel-charles-s-kettles-va-medical-center>), “Charles S. Kettles obituary,” Janowiak Funeral Home (<https://www.janowiakfuneralhome.com/obituary/charles-kettles>), and “Medal of Honor Recipient Charles Seymour Kettles Veteran Oral History,” Veterans History Project collection, Eastern Michigan University archives (<https://www.youtube.com/>

watch?v=iCthnGna-6g&t=7s)

About the Author

Connor K. Ashley is an EMU graduate student studying for his MA in history and MS in historic preservation. Connor received his BA in political science from Wayne State University, in 2019. He is also a graduate assistant in the Department of Geography and Geology, in the EMU Archives, where he has worked closely with the Veterans History Project collection donated by Ypsilanti Rotary Club volunteer Bill Vollano.