



KETTLES

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Lieutenant Colonel Charles Kettles

MEDAL OF HONOR

VIETNAM WAR

On 15 May 1967, soldiers from 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne were battling hundreds of heavily armed North Vietnamese in a rural riverbed near Duc Pho, Republic of Vietnam. They made an urgent request for aviation support to evacuate the wounded and to bring more soldiers into the fight. Answering the early morning call, then Maj. Charles Kettles led a flight of six Huey helicopters, carrying replacements and supplies, to a landing zone near the battle area.

Under heavy enemy fire, Kettles landed his aircraft and kept it there, exposed, until the wounded could be loaded for the return to base. After evacuating them, he returned to drop off more soldiers and supplies, and to pick up additional wounded. On the second trip, his gunner was seriously wounded and his aircraft severely damaged. However, Kettles was able to make it back to base.

Approaching evening, forty-four American soldiers still were pinned down, including four from Kettles' unit. Disregarding the danger, he volunteered to fly his unit's one remaining functional helicopter for a third trip, in which he led five additional evacuation helicopters from another

unit. On the landing zone, soldiers ready for evacuation boarded the helicopters. Then, informed that all American soldiers were accounted for, Kettles took off. However, once in the air, he learned that eight men who had been pinned down under heavy enemy fire while providing covering fire for the others had not made it aboard.

In response, Kettles broke off from formation and returned alone to the landing zone—this time with no aerial or artillery support. As he landed the helicopter, which was now the lone target of the enemy, it suffered extensive damage from small arms and mortar fire, but the eight remaining soldiers were able to make it onto the aircraft. Although the helicopter was now six hundred pounds overweight and carrying thirteen soldiers, Kettles was able to skip it along the ground until it gained enough speed for takeoff, all the while continuing to be hit by enemy fire, including a mortar round that struck the tail. "If we left them for ten minutes," Kettles later said of the rescued soldiers, "they'd be POWs or dead." With exceptional flying skills and uncommon courage, Kettles flew the damaged aircraft back to base, evacuating the remaining soldiers and his crew to safety. ■

Left: President Barack Obama presented the Medal of Honor to U.S. Army Lt. Col. (retired) Charles Kettles 18 July 2016 in the East Room of the White House for conspicuous gallantry during combat operations near Duc Pho, Republic of Vietnam, on 15 May 1967. Kettles is credited with saving the lives of forty soldiers and four of his own crewmembers. (Photo by Sgt. Alicia Brand, U.S. Army)