

Ypsilanti GLEANINGS

Official publication of the Ypsilanti Historical Society, featuring articles and reminiscences of the people and places in the Ypsilanti area



SPECIAL ISSUE

HEROISM

By Bill Nickels

Charles "Charlie" Kettles grandfather, James Stobie, lived in London, Ontario. In route to Chicago from his home in London, Ontario, James met P.R. Cleary (founder and president of Cleary College) here in Ypsilanti. He moved with his wife Jane and four of his eight children from London to Ypsilanti and bought 11 N. Normal, just north of the Cleary home. James died in 1918 while Jane continued to live on North Normal until her death in 1933.

Charles dad was a pilot in both World War I and World War II. In between the wars, he flew for SKF Flying Service and the State of Michigan in Lansing where Charles grew up. While visiting aunts on North Normal, Charles became acquainted with Ann Cleary living next door. During World War II, Charles dad flew newly built military aircraft to the European theater. After World War II, Charles' dad flew for Ford Motor Company and the family moved to Garden City where Charles attended the Edison Institute in Dearborn. In 1947, Charles dad moved back to Lansing to be chief pilot for Abram's Aerial Survey and Charles moved to North Normal with his aunts to finish his high school years. A friendship grew between Ann and Charles during this time.

Charles graduated from high school in 1949 and enrolled in Michigan State Normal College (MSNC, now EMU). Graduating from high school in 1948, Ann attended the University of Michigan, graduating in 1952. She married a classmate in 1953. In addition to attending MSNC full time, Charles' full time job handling baggage for American Airlines at Willow Run Airport kept him tangentially associated with flying. While attending MSNC, he learned to fly a single engine Aircoup. The Aircoup was engineered to fly like a car drives. Little did Charles know that this experience would lead to dramatic heroism. Charles dropped out of school after the 1951 spring term and took a second full time job with Kaiser Fraser Export Corporation with the intention to resume school in the spring of 1952. With the Korean War going strong, Charles' plans changed when he was drafted into the Army in October of 1951.



Charles "Charlie" Kettles standing in uniform in front of a case in the YHS Museum depicting the highlights of his military career.



In the Army, Charles attended Officers Candidate School at Fort Knox, Kentucky. Later that year, he was assigned to Army Flight School which he graduated from in April of 1954. After graduation, he was sent to Korea. By then, the conflict was over and his unit was transferred to Japan later he was transferred to Thailand. His commitment to the Army ended and he married in August of 1956.

Returning to Lansing, Charles joined the 4/20th Field Artillery Battalion commanding an 8 inch Howitzer Battery. Starting in 1956, he and his brother owned a Ford dealership in Dewitt Charlie spent two weeks each summer at a military base for training, such as Camp McCoy in Wisconsin.

When Vietnam started to heat up in 1963, the Army found itself in need of helicopter pilots. Responding to the need, Charles volunteered in 1963. He attended the helicopter transition program at Ft. Wolters, Texas. From Texas it was on to France and then TDY to Germany where Charles learned to fly UH-1 "Huey" helicopters. From Germany, it was back to Ft. Benning, Georgia to form the 176th Assault Helicopter Company. As a Junior Major in 1967, Charles commanded the 1st Platoon of the 176th Assault Helicopter Company. Each helicopter had a crew of four, a pilot, copilot, crew chief, and gunner who manned 7.62 machine guns on each side of the aircraft. A helicopter lift platoon was composed of eleven helicopters. The Company was composed of two lift platoons and one gunship platoon. The gunship platoon was made up of nine heavily armed gunship helicopters. The 176th was ordered to fly their helicopters to California where they were transported to Vietnam by ship. In Vietnam, the 176th worked in support of the First Brigade of the famous 101st Airborne Division.

On the 14th of May 1967, Charles was stationed at Duc Pho Airfield in the central highlands of Vietnam. What seemed to be a routine assignment, six men of the 101st

were dropped off by helicopter north of Duc Pho to do a reconnaissance patrol. They met heavy fire from the

enemy and retreated to a B-52 bomb crater. Soon after he arrived to pick up the men, he was advised by Flight Control to leave the area. Another B-52 raid was scheduled to hit the area. After attempts to blow down tall trees in the area with the helicopter rotor failed, Charles had his crew chief and gunner remove their safety straps, linked them together, secured one end to the helicopter, and threw them overboard to the ground troops. Several attempts by the ground troops to climb up the straps were unsuccessful. Completely disregarding his own personal safety, Charles slid back his armor plating and hung

out of the window in order to demonstrate to the patrol members how to tie the straps forming a sling around themselves. Charles lifted four of the men one at a time using the sling. A second helicopter lifted the remaining two men. Minutes later the B-52 strike finally took place. The two helicopters moved the six men to a secure area to the west where they continued their reconnaissance.

On the 15th of May 1967, Charles' platoon flew a group of eight helicopters with five members of the 101st aboard each helicopter to the area where the patrol was dropped off the day before. After two lifts, eighty men entered combat. They moved up a river valley into an ambush and suffered heavy casualties. Charles volunteered to carry reinforcements to the embattled force and evacuate their wounded from the battle site. Small arms and automatic weapons fire raked the landing zone and inflicted heavy damage to the ships, but Charles refused to leave the ground until all their craft were loaded to capacity. He then led them out of the battle area. He later returned to the battle field with more reinforcements and landed in the midst of a rain of mortar and automatic weapons fire which wounded his gunner and ruptured his fuel tank. After loading more wounded aboard, he nursed his crippled ship back to his base. In an attempt to supply the men with needed ammunition, another helicopter was destroyed. Suffering damage from ground fire



Charles Kettles in May of 1967.



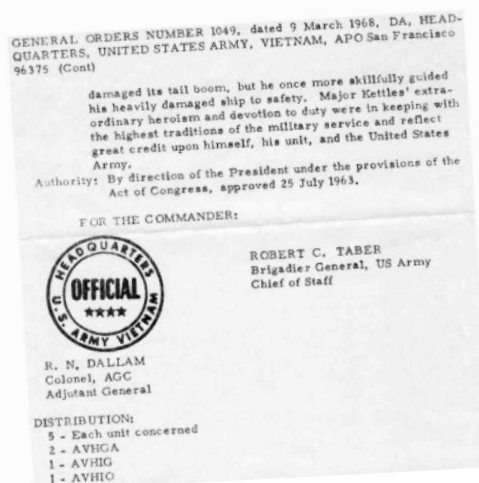
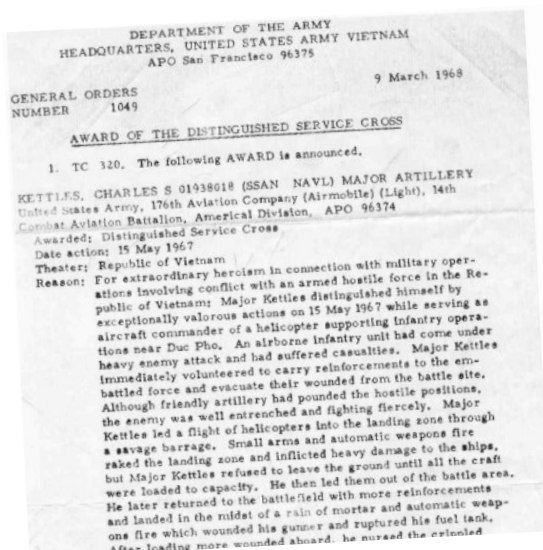
during extraction, his company was down to one flyable helicopter. After securing additional helicopters from the 161st Attack Helicopter Company, Charles led a flight of six ships to rescue the infantry unit. Because their landing area was very narrow, Charles and his platoon flew back in trail formation making them vulnerable to ground fire. Landing, Charles picked up one man and the tail helicopter signaled that all the men were aboard helicopters. Thinking all were picked up, the helicopters took off on a route that would loop around back to Duc Pho Airfield. After looping around, a radio message from the command and control helicopter reported that eight men were still on the ground and missed being picked up. With one aboard, Charles volunteered to return for the others. Without the support of gun ships or artillery and surprise as his only ally, Charles flew back into the river valley. Completely disregarding his own safety, he maneuvered his lone craft through savage enemy fire to where the remainder of the infantrymen waited. Mortar fire blasted out the helicopter chin bubble and part of the windshield, but he remained on the ground until all eight men were aboard. The enemy concentrated massive firepower on his helicopter and another round badly damaged his tail boom. His UH-1 "Huey" had a load limit of five men plus his crew. With nine passengers, he was now four men over the helicopter's load limit. When the copilot tried to take off, his helicopter fish tailed severely. Charles took over the controls and found that the engine did not have enough power for a normal take off. Charles lowered the pitch of the control rotor blade so the rotor rpms could reach normal rpm. With normal rotor rpm, Charles was able to lift the helicopter off the ground and move forward. With the overloaded helicopter, the rotor rpm would again slow down, so again he lowered the pitch, easing the helicopter to the ground, trading a decrease of altitude for normal rotor

rpm. With normal rotor rpm, Charles was able to lift the helicopter and move forward, only to have the rpm again slow down. Repeating this process five or six times with five or six bounces down the valley floor, Charles was finally able to achieve enough forward speed to maintain flight. Charles calls the UH-1 a "Great machine!" We can only imagine the relief the crew and rescued men felt as they finally knew they were returning to their base. Twenty-one helicopters were damaged by enemy fire beyond repair that day. Nine of his crew members were wounded.

On the 16th of May 1967, Major Don Phillips commander of the 176th Assault Helicopter Company reassigned Charlie as Operations Officer. Explaining why, Major Phillips said "Maybe you can figure out what an Assault Helicopter Company does without any helicopters." Charles left Vietnam in October of 1967.

A second tour of duty found Charles back in Vietnam in 1969. He commanded the 121st Assault Helicopter Company in the Mekong Delta. According to Charles, the war had changed and now was an administrative record keeping war.

In 1970, Charlie returned to Fort Sam Houston where he worked in the aviation division and a readiness group that supported the National Guard and Army Reserve troops. The Army encouraged their officers to obtain a college degree. Charles returned to Ypsilanti in 1971 and inquired about finishing his degree at EMU. While in town, he stopped to visit Ann Cleary's mother at 1310 West Cross. Ann's mother contacted Ann at EMU where she worked and suggested she stop by the house since Charlie was in town. They married in 1977. He finished his service as a Lieutenant Colonel in 1978 while at Fort Sam Houston.



Official orders awarding Charles Kettles the Distinguished Service Cross.



Charles and Ann married in 1977.

Upon his discharge, Charles returned to Michigan and finished his undergraduate degree that he started twenty-nine years earlier. He went on to complete a Masters and taught at Eastern for six years where he established the Aviation Management Degree program in 1982. During this time, he was elected and served as an Ypsilanti City Council member. In 1984, Charles went on to work at Chrysler Pentastar Aviation until his retirement in 1993.

For his efforts on the 14th of May 1967, Charles was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for heroism while participating in aerial flight as evidenced by voluntary action above and beyond the call of duty. For his efforts on the 15th of May 1967, Charles was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for extraordinary heroism in connection with military operations involving conflict with an armed hostile force in the Republic of Vietnam. The Bronze Star with Oak Leaf Cluster was awarded to Charles for bravery. The Bronze Star is the fourth highest combat award given by the United States. The Republic of Vietnam awarded Charles the Gallantry Cross given for heroic conduct while fighting an enemy force. By displaying meritorious achievement while participating in aerial flight, Charles received twenty-seven Air Medal Awards.

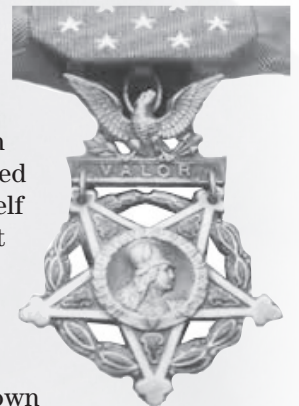
In 2012, Bill Volano, local Coordinator of the Veterans History Project, learned of Charles' Viet Nam history. Recognizing that it was extraordinary, he decided to inquire about upgrading his Distinguished Service Cross to the Congressional Medal of Honor. Talking to Charles, he got the names of a few who served with him. Starting with Roland Sheck, helicopter door gunner for Charles, the names of those who served with him on the 14th and 15th of May in 1967 were put together. All were contacted and enthusiastically volunteered to write letters supporting the medal upgrade. Most credited Charles for saving their lives.

Following procedure, Bill wrote a letter to Congressman John Dingell nominating Charles for the Medal of Honor. With the assistance of Charles' son Michael, Congressman John Dingell, later Congresswoman Debbie Dingell, and their staff person Sharon Vespremi who worked tirelessly; the nomination was filed with the Department of Defense. Secretary of Defense Ash Carter rendered an endorsement on August 14, 2015. As of this writing, Charles' Medal of Honor is in the hands of Congress to extend the time limit for such an award. It will then be submitted to the President for final approval.



Charles and Ann with their grand children.

The Medal of Honor is the highest medal awarded by the United States. It is awarded by the President to a person who, while a member of the Armed Services, distinguished himself conspicuously by gallantry at the risk of his life and beyond the call of duty. The Medal of Honor is designed for heroes who are sometimes defined as persons who disregard their own personal safety to help another. Charles is a hero and deserving of a Medal of Honor several times over.



Medal of Honor that Charles has been nominated to receive.