

William Morgan Keys



William M. Keys, LtGen USMC, Ret a graduate of the U.S Naval Academy, a highly decorated Marine Corps leader and revered veteran of the Vietnam War and Operation Desert Storm, passed away on January 24, 2026, after a lifetime of distinguished service to his country and community.

Born on March 29, 1937, in Fredericktown, Pennsylvania, William Morgan Keys was raised in a close-knit, working-class family deeply rooted in the values of hard work and patriotism. The son of World

War I veteran Charles Keys and Elizabeth Morgan Keys grew up alongside his late brothers, David Lee Keys and Charles Dennis Keys, in a community shaped by Pennsylvania's coal mining heritage. His upbringing instilled in him a sense of discipline and service that would define his life's path.

Appointed to the United States Naval Academy, Keys graduated in 1960 with a Bachelor of Science degree and in 2008 was inducted as a Naval Academy Distinguished Graduate. Upon his graduation he was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the United States Marine Corps. He completed The Basic School at Quantico, Virginia, and was designated an infantry officer, beginning a 34-year career that would see him rise from platoon leader to commanding general of major Marine forces.

During his early career, Keys served as a rifle platoon leader with the 3rd Battalion, 2nd Marines, and later as company commander with the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines in Vietnam. His valor in combat was legendary; he was awarded the Navy Cross for extraordinary heroism during Operation Prairie II in 1967, where he led his company against numerically superior North Vietnamese forces, personally engaging the enemy and orchestrating a decisive victory. He also received the Silver Star, Bronze Star with Combat "V," and numerous other decorations for his gallantry and leadership.

Keys returned to Vietnam for a second tour as a major and advisor to the Vietnamese Marine Brigade, playing a pivotal role in the recapture and defense of

Quang Tri Province. His innovative tactics and steadfast leadership contributed significantly to the success of allied operations during a critical period of the conflict.

After returning from Vietnam, Keys attended Amphibious Warfare School, and later the Marine Corps Command and Staff College. As a lieutenant colonel, Keys was selected to attend the National War College in Washington, D.C.

Throughout his career, Keys held a series of key command and staff positions, including Commanding Officer of the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines; Regimental Commander of the 6th Marines; and Commanding General of the 2nd Marine Division. During Operation Desert Storm, he led the 2nd Marine Division as a major component of a brilliant two-pronged assault by the two Marine Divisions that breached Iraqi defenses and liberated Kuwait—a maneuver lauded by General Norman Schwarzkopf as “simply brilliant.” He later served as Commander of U.S. Marine Corps Forces, Atlantic, and other joint commands until his retirement in 1994.

His military decorations include the Navy Cross, two Distinguished Service Medals, the Defense Distinguished Service Medal, Silver Star, Legion of Merit with Combat “V,” Bronze Star with Combat “V,” Defense Meritorious Service Medal, Vietnam Service Medal with four bronze stars, and numerous foreign honors, including the Republic of Vietnam Cross of Gallantry with Palm. He was also among the select few chosen to wear Colonel Merritt A. “Red Mike” Edson’s rank insignia, a rare honor in the Marine Corps.

After retiring from active duty, Keys continued his legacy of leadership as President and CEO of Colt Defense LLC and Colt’s Manufacturing Company, where he guided the companies through financial recovery and revitalization. He remained active in military education, philanthropy, and veteran affairs, serving as a director of the Marine Corps-Law Enforcement Foundation and as a mentor to young officers and Naval Academy midshipmen. He was also a dedicated member of the Scottish Rite Freemasons and was honored as a 33rd Degree Mason, reflecting his commitment to service and fraternity beyond his military career. In recognition of his service, a bridge in western Pennsylvania was named in his honor.

After Keys retired from Colt, he spent the remainder of his distinguished days on his farm in Virginia surrounded by his horses and dogs while he watched his daughter grow up into an exceptional young woman. Lieutenant General William M. Keys is remembered as a Marine's Marine—an inspirational leader, a devoted patriot, and a man of unwavering loyalty to his country, his Corps and his Marines. His legacy endures in the countless Marines he led, the institutions he strengthened, and the nation he served with valor and distinction. He is survived by his beloved daughter Elizabeth (Lizzie) Keys; nieces, friends, and the generations of Marines who carry forward his example of courage, commitment, and honor. He is preceded in death by his brothers David Lee Keys and Charles Dennis Keys.

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