

The Uncle You Never Got to Know

Remembering Allen Francis Keating

August 1, 1948 - October 19, 1969

Before you knew him as Uncle Allen, before his name was engraved on a stone at Central Cemetery beside Little Harbor, he was a young man in a crowded house in Cohasset, with brothers and a sister, a girl he loved, and every reason to expect a long life.

He was the third of Gerard and Margaret Keating's seven children, the second of their six boys. His father was the town postmaster. His mother worked at the post office. In a town small enough that people knew one another's families, Allen was already someone people admired and respected.

He played quarterback at Cohasset High School and captained the baseball team. He was president of the Catholic Youth Organization, coached Little League, and helped establish the Police Athletic League. Younger boys knew him as a coach. His teammates knew him as a fierce competitor. His family knew the brother behind all those things.

This is where his story should begin. The soldier came later.

On New Year's Eve 1968, friends crowded into the Keating house on the highway to see Allen off. There were beers and food, lifelong family friends and classmates who had grown up together. At one point, members of the Cohasset High School Class of 1966 joined arms and sang the school fight song.

Just after midnight, the friends wished him well and began stepping out into the first cold hours of 1969.

Early the next morning, Allen said goodbye to his family. He hugged his inconsolable mother. He told his younger brothers he would go so they would not have to.

It was a promise beyond any brother's power to guarantee. But it revealed how he saw his place in the family: if something difficult had to be faced, he would face it for them.

When the sun came up, he was gone.

In Vietnam, Allen served with Company C, 2nd Battalion, 8th Infantry, 4th Infantry Division. Charlie Company operated in the Central Highlands, where dirt roads, Montagnard villages, jungle, and hills became the geography of his everyday life. Its close proximity to Laos and Cambodia meant a steady flow of NVA, or North Vietnamese regular army, into its area of operation.

His unit was mechanized infantry. The men traveled with M113 armored personnel carriers, or APCs, carrying ammunition, equipment, and supplies. “Mechanized” may imply a level of protection or safety, but the armored personnel carriers had aluminum frames and bodies that remained vulnerable to mines and rocket-propelled grenades. When the country became too difficult, or an enemy position had to be approached on foot, the infantrymen dismounted.

One of Allen’s closest friends became Roy “Airborne” Vance. Roy came from a dirt-poor area in Louisiana; Allen came from a middle-class Massachusetts coastal community. On the surface, they could not have been any less alike.

In Vietnam, they shared an armored personnel carrier. They exchanged family histories and learned to depend on each other through the long stretches of tension and the sudden moments of terrifying violence.

That bond helps explain one of the clearest accounts of Allen’s courage.

On March 4, 1969, Roy was wounded during an ambush. In the account he later sent to Allen’s family, Roy described what happened:

“When Allen saw that I had been hit, he grabbed five hundred rounds of ammunition, ran to me, and stood with me between his legs, firing. He wouldn’t stop.”

When the firefight ended, they were “dusted off” by helicopter. Roy transferred to a hospital in Japan for two months. Allen had some shrapnel removed from his arm and returned to duty.

It is a hard scene to imagine without stopping over its simplest fact.

Allen’s friend was down, and Allen went to him.

He exposed himself to enemy fire to protect a man who could no longer protect himself. As a result of his actions, Allen received the first of two Bronze Stars.

For Roy, it was more personal than an award citation could ever be. He had been the man on the ground. He knew what Allen had done.

There was another kind of courage in Allen’s service, quieter but no less revealing.

A young medic named Robertson “Doc” Sheehy came to the unit full of self-doubt, with little experience of life in the field. Decades later, he posted a message on a Vietnam veterans’ website entitled “I Remember”:

“Allen, I think of you often; how you took me under your wing when I was just a cherry boy! I was on R&R when you were killed, and I never got a chance to say goodbye. If I were there, maybe I could’ve helped. My friend, I hope you are resting in peace.”

That is something his nephews can recognize even without having known him. The young man who coached children in Cohasset became the experienced soldier helping

a newcomer find his footing. The older brother who wanted to spare his brothers became someone other men could turn to.

By September, Allen's focus shifted away from the madness of Vietnam's Central Highlands. Over Labor Day weekend, he took his R&R, or rest and recuperation, and met his high-school sweetheart, Ann, in Hawaii.

Without any previous announcement or indication, they were married.

For a few days, the future they had imagined together became real.

Then they separated again. Ann returned to Cohasset, and Allen returned to Charlie Company.

He entered October as a twenty-one-year-old newlywed, counting the days until Christmas, when he would begin an exciting new life.

By October, he was also a seasoned infantryman. More than ten months had passed since his departure from home. He had learned the difference between the sound of ordinary movement and the sound of impending danger. He had seen what happened when men were wounded. He knew how quickly a quiet stretch of country could erupt into chaos.

In October, as the monsoon season eased, a new commander arrived with a new mission. Captain William H. Edmondson had a more aggressive approach. According to some in his command, he pushed patrols deeper down the unexplored trails off Highway 14 as they searched for NVA supply routes feeding in from the Ho Chi Minh Trail, in the country west of Pleiku and around Plei Mrong.

The daily logs from the middle of October describe movements, positions, patrols, and increased enemy contact.

Behind those brief entries were men carrying weapons and ammunition, maintaining equipment, watching the ground ahead, and trying to determine where the enemy might next appear.

For Allen, there was the additional weight of experience. He was no longer the replacement arriving at a strange unit. He was one of the men who knew how things worked, someone a newer soldier could watch and learn from.

As the company operated through mid-October, the ground ahead concealed an enemy position that would prove deadly. Near Plei Mrong, in the area identified by map coordinate ZA 091 734, North Vietnamese Army troops occupied hidden defensive positions.

*Map detail: Plei Mrong area, showing Highway 14, the approximate company movement, and coordinate ZA 091 734.
Caption: "The area of the October 19 engagement."*

A coordinate makes a place look precise and manageable. On the ground, vegetation could hide a bunker until men were dangerously close. A soldier could know the general direction of the firing and still be unable to see the man firing at him.

By October 18, Charlie Company was approaching the action that would dominate the following day. There were brief exchanges of fire, and there were casualties.

We do not have Allen's account of that last night. We cannot say what he talked about or whether he spoke of Ann or home, but surely he was aware of the increasing frequency of contact with the enemy, and that had to weigh on his mind.

Sunday, October 19, began as the last day of his life. Enemy contact began early.

Allen and Roy were together again.

Roy recalled:

"We went out on a company-sized sweep. We were supposed to be chasing about six companies of NVA.

"About 8:30 a.m., we were hit by about three companies of NVA. They killed two GIs and wounded five. When the firefight was over and the dust-offs were complete, it was around 10:30 or 11 a.m.

"We moved about 200 meters to our south, and they hit us again. They killed two more GIs and wounded three or four more. Allen was on the radio with the first platoon. He was trying to get them to flank on our right. The jungle was so thick you couldn't see five feet in front of you. By this time, we had been fighting for about four hours.

"All of a sudden, an NVA about six or ten feet away jumped up and started shooting at us. I got down, and I saw Allen was down. I opened up with a .50-caliber machine gun. I started running low on ammo and calling for Allen to bring more ammo. Well, he never did answer, and he never did answer, so I reached over and grabbed him. He rolled over, and I saw he was wounded in the head."

Months earlier, Allen had stood over Roy with a machine gun and ammunition while his friend lay wounded. Now, in the October fighting, Roy needed more ammunition and called to Allen.

Allen would not answer.

Roy was not wounded that day. He was the friend who reached Allen, retrieved him to the rear, and lived to tell the family what had happened.

There is no need to give Allen invented last words. The truth is moving enough: Roy called for the man he had trusted through months of combat, and there was no reply.

Allen was twenty-one.

For Roy, the loss was the death of the friend who had once stood over him and kept firing.

Within weeks, he wrote to Allen's family. He tried to give them something that official notification could not: a true accounting of their son as another soldier had known him.

He could tell them that Allen had been beside him. That they had shared the same dangers. That when Roy had been helpless, Allen had come.

Back in Cohasset, Ann became a widow at nineteen, only weeks after her wedding.

Gerard and Margaret lost their son. Joan and Allen's five brothers lost the person who belonged in the middle of their family. His friends lost the young man who had stood with them in a circle that New Year's Eve, singing the school fight song.

And, in time, there would be nephews who would know his name without ever hearing his voice.

That is why retelling his story matters.

Allen was buried in Cohasset Central Cemetery beside Little Harbor. Over the years, remembrance took familiar forms: flowers from Ann, friends dropping by, Doc Sheehy and Roy Vance both making the trip to Cohasset, and the town's Memorial Day observance at his gravesite, where Taps was played.

In 2017, his old friend and teammate Vic Pimentel came to that remembrance in a wheelchair while terminally ill. Almost half a century had passed since Allen's death. His friend still came.

On October 19, 2026, fifty-seven years will have passed.

Allen never had the chance to grow older with his brothers, to meet their children, or to become the uncle who could tell you these stories himself.

What those stories show is a young man whose care for others survived the journey from Cohasset to Vietnam.

When his brothers faced his departure, he tried to reassure them.

When a new medic needed help, he offered it.

When Roy lay wounded, he saved him.

That is the uncle you never got to know.

And that is the man worth remembering.