



Lt. General William M. Keys, USMC (Ret.)

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

KEEPING THE LEGEND OF COLT ALIVE

The President and CEO of Colt brings a world of experience and military history to America's iconic firearms company. No better leader fills this position and his track record speaks for itself. Meet Lt. General William M. Keys.

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General Keys with his wife on the porch of their home in Virginia.



Keys and his favorite horses on his ranch.

“I spent long hours in the factory for the first four or five years, but it paid off in the end.”

- Lt. General William M. Keys

The Colt revolving-cylinder concept is said to have occurred to a young Sam Colt while serving as a seaman aboard the sailing ship Corvo. It was there he observed a similar principle in the workings of the ship’s capstan.

One hundred seventy-five years ago, Colt filed a patent on the 1836 Paterson, a revolver that changed the game and forever embedded the iconic firearm brand into the minds of generations worldwide. Today, this legacy continues under the leadership of Lt. General William M. Keys, USMC (Ret.), Colt’s president and chief executive officer.

Keys grew up in Fredericktown, a farming and coal-mining community located alongside Pennsylvania’s Monongahela River. He and his mother, sister and two brothers helped with the family farm while his dad worked the mines and later ran a school bus and taxi business.

After graduating high school, Keys entered the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland and selected the Marine Corps as his choice for service. After graduating from Annapolis in 1960, he entered the Marine Corps Base Quantico.

As an infantry officer, General Keys served at every level of operational command, platoon through regiment.

As Commanding General, 2nd Marine Division during Operation Desert Storm in the Persian Gulf, he led some 16,000 Marine and 4700 Tiger Brigade forces, the heaviest armored division in Marine Corps history, through minefields and anti-tank barriers, in its successful assault into Kuwait City.

“The Gulf War was a major undertaking,” recalls Keys. “We deployed over 500,000 people to the Gulf in less than three months. I think that should be the model for all wars. You go in heavy, beat them up and leave.”

In the Gulf, Keys served under General H. Norman Schwarzkopf (Ret.), Commander of U.S. Central Command and Commander of the Coalition Forces during Operation Desert Storm.

“Schwarzkopf was a great leader,” say Keys. “He was a tough guy. If he liked you or thought you were doing a good job he was great. If he did not, he was really tough on you.”

Keys additionally served two tours in Vietnam, and held numerous principal staff assignments, both in the Marine Corps and on the Joint Staff.

He served the first of his two Vietnam tours when he was 25. “You see lots of combat, you see lots of young kids killed,” says Keys. “You see young Marines do acts of bravery and sacrifices that are truly phenomenal. We can never do enough to repay those guys for what they did, not just the Marines, but all services.”

His personal decorations and medals include the Navy Cross, Silver Star Medal, and other high-ranking military awards.

Lieutenant General William M. Keys retired from the U.S. Marine Corps in 1994 after 40 years of service. His last active duty assignment was as the Commander, U.S. Marine Corps Forces, Atlantic.

After leaving the service, Keys, not sure of what he wanted to do, went out West and spent almost two years on an Arizona ranch. Mentally bored with this somewhat leisurely life, Keys took a job at an investment bank in New York City and eventually landed on the board of directors at Colt.

When the company was in distress in 1999, Keys was asked to run the company and accepted the position of president and CEO.

This was a critical time when dozens of municipalities around the country had brought frivolous lawsuits against Colt and other leading handgun manufacturers in an effort to use litigation costs to the bring companies to their knees. General Keys shepherded Colt through the legal thicket and

successfully reoriented the business back toward military and law enforcement customers.

“Colt at that time was like a military unit in need of supervision,” Keys recalls. “They really had no day-to-day management. It was kind of like a ship adrift. So they needed a steady hand. I spent long hours in the factory for the first four or five years, but it paid off in the end.”



Generals H. Norman Schwarzkopf and William M. Keys during the Persian Gulf War.



General Keys and Colt Mounted Shooting Spokespersons Andra Olson and Jim Hanson.

a natural fit. And to have the mounted shooting and these individuals riding around on a pretty classy horses and shooting a Colt pistol is a snapshot of history that can never be equaled anywhere else.”

Keys says he is proud of the efforts put forth by mounted shooters and Colt Spokesperson Andra Olson and Jim Hanson of AJ Horses. He is in full support of the national mounted shooting programs they sponsor and recently held a mounted shooting exhibition and clinic at his ranch.

Favorite gun

Keys has carried the same 1911 Colt in all three combat tours of his military career. He still owns the gun, which he bought from the NRA many years ago for \$14.00.

When asked about his favorite gun: “I have two guns that I really favor. The 1911, of course, because I grew up with that gun in the military, and the Single Action Peacemaker.

But the 1911 is a wonderful pistol...truly very capable. It was a sidearm of the U.S. Military for over 100 years and served it well. Even though there are other double action guns out there that the military is using, the real shooters are the guys that want to still carry the 1911. It’s phenomenal.”

When asked where he sees the 1911 and Single Action Army 50 years from now: “I don’t think they’ll be any different. I think you will have people that love the gun just as much as they do today.

One word that describes you

“I’ve always tried to take care of my troops and I believe if you take care of your men no matter where it is, combat, here, they’ll take care of you. The number one word in my vocabulary is loyalty. If you’re loyal to me, I’ll be loyal to you. And loyalty, it makes the organization in my opinion. Whether you are loyal to the brand, the CEO, you have to have loyalty. “

About Guns and the Right To Bear Arms

“I don’t call myself a gun nut so to speak. I don’t collect or shoot all the time. I just think they are what they are and you have to appreciate what they have done for this country and freedom all over the world. Guns are very necessary in this world today. They in their way insure our way of life. One can go back in history and verify this fact.

The United Nations is trying to enact a gun control rule throughout the world. I think it’s a very bad concept in the future world. You have to give people the right to defend themselves. All governments are never going to be perfect. Some are going to be really bad. When you take that right away, when you take that ability to arm yourself sooner or later you’re going to have a real problem.

This country was founded, I truly believe, on the second amendment. I think it’s a really important part of our constitution. And you are always going to have to fight to keep it in there.”

Those efforts culminated in the spin-off of Colt’s military and law enforcement rifle business to Colt Defense and the establishment of the Colt M4 carbine as the standard-issue combat rifle of the United States Army and Marines.

“When I first got here we didn’t have the money to spend on R&D [research and development] and that’s been one of my goals, to grow that part of the business,” says Keys. “And we have. We now have about 10 to 15 great engineers and we are very competitive in the gun world, technology wise.”

Quality Makes It A Colt.

“That’s a very true statement. Everything here is quality. On the military side without any question we make the best guns in the world. We make them to military standards and we’re ISO [International Standards Organization] qualified. If it’s not right, we’re not sending it out there. We have a great quality system at Colt,” Keys says.

Same thing on the commercial side

(where the Colt Single Action Army and 1911 are produced). Although you don’t have those same regulations hanging over you like on the military side, we have the same mental capacity and the same feeling that you want make all the guns here truly quality.”

On Family and Fatherhood

Keys married shortly after joining Colt and unexpectedly became a father. “I never thought that at that age I would ever have a child and I actually told my wife she didn’t need to worry because I did not think it was possible. “We were married about a year and the next thing along came Elizabeth and she’s the joy of my life. She just started kindergarten this year.”

On Mounted Shooting and Horses

Keys lives on a multi acre ranch in the Virginia countryside near Washington, D.C. There he keeps his prized quarter horses, several which are trained shooting horses.

“My dad was a good horseman. I grew up with this horse history. My dad was in the mounted artillery in World War I and we had horses on the family farm. Anything horse wise that was going on in the area, my dad would take us to it as a family.

I think Colt, horses, and the West, is all part of American history. And I think the two come together so well. It’s just



Elizabeth, upside-down at a ranch function, is the joy of Key’s life.



A view from a quieter time in life for General Keys. The Virginia countryside from his back porch.