

General John W. Vessey Jr.



Born John William Vessey Jr., June 29th, 1922, Minneapolis, Minnesota

Died August 18th, 2016, North Oaks, Minnesota (Aged 94)

United States Military Officer, United States Army

Years of Service, 1939-1941 (U.S. Army National Guard)
1941-1985 (United States Army)

Commands held:

34th Infantry Division

2nd Battalion, 73rd Field Artillery, 3rd Armored Division

3rd Armored Division, Artillery

4th Infantry Division (Mechanized)

8th United States Army

Commander in Chief of the Republic of Korea-U.S. Combined Forces Com.

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff

Wars:

World War II

Korean War

Vietnam War

Awards:

Distinguished Service Cross

Defense Distinguished Service Medal

Army Distinguished Service Medal

Navy Distinguished Service Medal

Air Force Distinguished Service Medal

Legion of Merit

Bronze Star

Purple Heart

Presidential Medal of Freedom

General John W. Vessey, Jr. - The 10th Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff

General John W. Vessey, Jr. was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota, on 29 June 1922. He enlisted in the Minnesota National Guard in May 1939 while still in high school, becoming a member of Headquarters, 59th Field Artillery Brigade, 34th Infantry Division. He was only 16 and fibbed about his age to join. With other members of his unit he was called to active duty in February 1941. When war came, the 34th became the first American division sent to Europe, where it initially fought in North Africa and then in Italy. A natural leader, Vessey rose quickly in the enlisted ranks until 6 May 1944 when, pinned down on the Anzio Beachhead amidst high casualties, the 21-year old battery first sergeant was given a battlefield commission and sent forward to direct artillery fire.

Vessey decided to stay in the Army after war. During his first 30 years of military service, he spent most of his time in combat divisions. In addition to his World War II assignment with the 34th Red Bull Infantry Division in North Africa and Italy, Vessey served with the 4th Infantry Division and 3rd Armored Division in Germany, the 25th Infantry Division in Vietnam and was commanding general of the 4th Infantry Division (Mechanized) at Fort Carson, Colorado.

He attended the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, the Armed Forces Staff College, and the Industrial College of the Armed Forces. He also graduated from the University of Maryland. His love of flying prompted him to earn his wings, which he always wore proudly. When he graduated from the Army Helicopter School in 1970, he was 15 years older than the next oldest student.

One of Vessey's toughest days as a Soldier came in 1967 when, as a lieutenant colonel, he rallied his 300-man artillery battalion against an intense six-hour assault by 2,000 enemy troops. Despite wounds, he assisted as a cannoneer, lowering the howitzer barrels and firing point blank into the onrushing attackers, sometimes just as they reached the guns. He finally spotted a group of enemy rocket launchers that were inflicting severe damage. "He seized a grenade launcher, moved into an open area and knocked out three of the insurgents' weapons," read the citation that earned him a Distinguished Service Cross for his actions that day.

In 1970, he returned to Southeast Asia for his first assignment as a brigadier general. He initially commanded USARSUPTHAI (US Army Supply Thailand), a supply and staging area for American Soldiers fighting in Southeast Asia, and then moved on to Laos, where he was responsible for coordinating U.S. military operations until the cease-fire was signed in February 1973. In 1974, he was promoted to major general and given command of the 4th Infantry Division.

Upon promotion to lieutenant general in 1975, Vessey became the U.S. Army's Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations and Plans. He received his fourth star in 1976 upon assignment to Korea as commander-in-chief, United Nations command; commander, U.S. forces, Korea; and commanding general, Eighth U.S. Army. In

1978, he also became the first commander-in-chief of the Republic of Korea-United States Combined Forces Command. General Vessey returned to Washington in July 1979 to become the vice chief of staff, United States Army.

President Ronald Reagan selected Vessey as the tenth chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, a position he held from 18 June 1982 to 30 September 1985. He was widely recognized in the Army as a "Soldier's Soldier," fair and firm, who always stood up for his troops. Believing that strength was the best deterrent to war, he championed Reagan's military buildup. Upon his retirement on 1 October 1985, he had served longer than anyone then in the Army, with over 46 years of active military service. He is the only Chairman who had been neither a service chief nor commander of a unified or specific command.

He is the recipient of numerous U.S. and foreign military decorations and awards, four honorary doctorates, and other honors too numerous to mention. His military decorations include the Distinguished Service Cross, the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Defense Distinguished Service Medals, the Purple Heart, and medals from 19 friendly and allied nations. In 1992, President George H. W. Bush awarded him the nation's highest civilian award, the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

General Vessey is married to the former Avis Funk of Minneapolis. They have two sons, John III and David, and a daughter, Sarah. They retired to a home near Garrison, Minnesota, but the general remained "on call." As a post-retirement assignment, he led negotiations with the government of Vietnam to account for missing American servicemen in that country. The task, which was to last three months, took more than six years. He remains in demand as an advisor and speaker.

Awards and Decorations



Aviator Badge



Joint Chiefs of Staff Identification Badge



Army Staff Identification Badge



Distinguished Service Cross



Defense Distinguished Service Medal with oak leaf cluster



Army Distinguished Service Medal with two oak leaf clusters



Navy Distinguished Service Medal



Air Force Distinguished Service Medal



Legion of Merit with oak leaf cluster



Bronze Star with oak leaf cluster



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Air Medal with award numeral 4



Joint Service Commendation Medal



Army Commendation Medal with "V" device



Purple Heart



Presidential Unit Citation



Presidential Medal of Freedom



Army Good Conduct Medal



American Defense Service Medal



American Campaign Medal



European-African-Middle Eastern Campaign Medal with silver and bronze campaign stars



World War II Victory Medal



Army of Occupation Medal



National Defense Service Medal with oak leaf cluster



Vietnam Service Medal with two campaign stars



Croix de Guerre with bronze palm (France)



Order of Military Merit, Taegeuk Cordon (Korea)



Vietnam Cross of Gallantry with bronze palm



Republic of Vietnam Gallantry Cross Unit Citation



Republic of Vietnam Civil Actions Medal Unit Citation



Vietnam Campaign Medal

Assignments

- 1939: National Guard enlisted service
- 1941: 34th Division Artillery, Camp Claiborne, LA, Northern Ireland, North Africa, and Italy as S/ Sgt, 1st Sgt, and then battlefield commission to 2Lt (Communications Officer/Forward Observer/ Air Observer)
- 1945: US Army Field Artillery School, Fort Sill, OK
- 1949: Student, Field Artillery Officers Advanced Course, Field Artillery School, Fort Sill, OK
- 1950: Battery Officer; then Battery Commander, 18th Field Artillery, Fort Sill, OK
- 1951: Assistant S-3 and Liaison Officer; then Headquarters Battery Commander; then Assistant S-3 and Liaison Officer, 4th Infantry Division Artillery US Army, Europe
- 1954: Student, Artillery Officer Advanced Course, Artillery and Guided Missile School, Fort Sill, OK
- 1955: Battery Commander, Artillery and Guided Missile School Officer Candidate School
- 1956: Gunnery Instructor, Artillery and Guided Missile School, Fort Sill, OK
- 1957: Student, US Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, KS
- 1958: Artillery Section, Eighth US Army with duty station CINCPAC Coordination Center, Philippines
- 1958: Chief, Operations Branch, Artillery Section, Eighth US Army, Korea
- 1959: Assignment Officer, then Executive Officer, Artillery Officers Division, Office of Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel, Washington, D.C.
- 1963: Student, Armed Forces Staff College, Norfolk, VA
- 1963: Commander, 2d Battalion, 73d Artillery, 3d Armored Division, US Army, Europe
- 1965: Student, Industrial College of the Armed Forces, Washington, D.C.
- 1966: Executive Officer, 25th Infantry Division Artillery, Vietnam
- 1967: Commander, 3d Armored Division Artillery, US Army, Europe
- 1969: Chief of Staff, 3d Armored Division, US Army, Europe
- 1970: Student, US Army Primary Helicopter School, Fort Wolters, TX; later US Army Aviation School, Fort Rucker, AL
- 1970: Commanding General, US Army Support Command, Thailand
- 1972: Deputy Chief, JUSMAGTHAI (Chief MAAG, Laos)
- 1973: Director of Operations, Office Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations and Plans, Washington, D.C.
- 1974: Commanding General, 4th Infantry Division (Mechanized), Fort Carson, CO
- 1975: Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations and Plans, US Army, Washington, D.C.
- 1976: Commanding General, Eighth US Army; and Commander in Chief, US Forces, Korea; and Commander in Chief, United Nations Command
- 1978: Commander in Chief, Republic of Korea-United States Combined Forces Command, Korea
- 1979: Vice Chief of Staff, US Army, Washington, D.C.
- 1982: Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, Washington, D.C.