

MILITARY HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF MINNESOTA

General John W. Vessey, Jr. (1922-2016)

Minnesota's top soldier

By Jack K. Johnson

General John William Vessey, Jr. was born on 29 June 1922. He grew up in Lakeville, Minnesota, then a small town, and later moved to Minneapolis where he graduated from Roosevelt High School. He was active in the Boy Scouts and captain of the swim team.

He enlisted as a 16-year old private 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 fibbed about his age in order to join (this was not uncommon and easy to do in those days). 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 the 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" 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 in the battle of Suoi Tre in Vietnam. 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 – the Army's second highest medal – for his actions that day. His unit received a Presidential Unit Citation.

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. "It was probably the greatest peacetime modernization of the American military establishment that ever took place," Vessey recalled in a 2004 interview. "We improved every facet of the armed forces, from the recruiting and retention, the selection of individuals, to the way they lived, but most importantly to the way they fought." At the time, the Soviet Union was pushing hard to strengthen its own military.

Upon his retirement on 1 October 1985, Vessey had served longer than anyone then in the Army, with over 46 years of active military service.

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 W. Bush awarded him the nation's highest civilian award, the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

He married his high school sweetheart, Avis C. Funk, of Minneapolis in 1946. She passed away in 2015 after 69 years of marriage. They had three children: John William III, Sarah Ann, and David Christopher. The Vesseys retired to a summer lake home near Garrison, Minnesota, and also had a year-round home north of St. Paul in North Oaks.

After retirement, he remained "on call" from presidents and the Pentagon. He led negotiations with the government of Vietnam to account for missing American servicemen in that country. The task, which was supposed to last three months, took more than six years. In retirement he also chaired the advisory board of the Center for Preventive Action, an arm of the Council on Foreign Relations that seeks to prevent conflicts before they erupt; consulted for the Defense Science Board, Army Science Board and the Sandia National Laboratory; he served on the commission that chose the design of the World War II Memorial in Washington, D.C.; and led an endowment campaign for colleges of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. Right up until his death, he remained active as a military advisor and sought-after speaker.

General Vessey died on 18 August 2016 at his home in North Oaks, age 94. He and his wife, Avis, are buried at the Minnesota State Veterans Cemetery, Camp Ripley.

He was a man of extraordinary ability, integrity, and deep, abiding faith, esteemed by all who knew him.

The [Military Historical Society of Minnesota](#) works to preserve and interpret Minnesota's military history. Activities include the [Minnesota Military Museum](#), which maintains an exhibit about General Vessey in Camp Ripley's Education Center.