



JOHN WILLIAM VESSEY, JR.

18 June 1982 — 30 September 1985

John Vessey, Jr., was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota, on 29 June 1922. In May 1939, thirteen months before he graduated from Roosevelt High School, he enlisted in the Minnesota National Guard as a motorcycle rider. His unit was activated in February 1941.

During World War II, Vessey served with the 34th Infantry Division. The experience of early American setbacks in North Africa left Vessey with a life-long appreciation of the need for realistic combat training, modern equipment, physical fitness, and air-ground cooperation. When Major General Omar Bradley, Commander of II Corps in North Africa, launched the US drive on Bizerte in April 1943, he gave the 34th the most difficult obstacle: the well-defended Hill 609. In the first clear-cut US Army victory of the campaign, the 34th Division took its objective, opening the way for the US advance on Bizerte. Vessey, who had been a first sergeant since 1 September 1942, later described being a first sergeant in combat as the “toughest job” he had. He was with the 34th when it entered the Anzio beachhead in Italy in May 1944; there he received a battlefield commission as a second lieutenant, serving as a forward observer.

After the war, most of Vessey’s service continued to be in field artillery assignments. In the 1950s he served with the 4th Infantry Division in Germany and the Eighth US Army in the Republic of Korea. During this period he also attended the Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

General John W. Vessey, Jr.
United States Army



Sergeant Vessey in World War II.

By the time Vessey became a lieutenant colonel, he had earned enough credits through night school and correspondence courses for a bachelor of science degree, which he received from the University of Maryland in 1963. In 1965 he received a master of science from George Washington University. From 1963 to 1965 Vessey commanded the 2d Battalion, 73d Field Artillery in the 3d Armored Division; then he spent a year as a student at the Industrial College of the Armed Forces.

During the Vietnam War, Vessey served for a year as Executive Officer of the 25th Infantry Division Artillery in Vietnam. In

March 1967, when acting as Commander of the 2d Battalion, 77th Artillery, he was given the mission of establishing a fire support base at Suoi Tre during Operation JUNCTION CITY. Located deep in enemy-controlled territory, Vessey and his men oriented the fire-base's defenses on the enemy's likely avenues of approach and rehearsed counterattack plans. During the attack by a reinforced regiment, the base was partially overrun. Vessey and his men fired their howitzers directly into the enemy ranks. Although greatly outnumbered, the defenders, aided by gunships and artillery, killed four hundred of their assailants while successfully defending the



General Vessey and Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger at a congressional hearing, February 1983.

firebase. Lieutenant Colonel Vessey received the Distinguished Service Cross for his actions during the battle.

From Vietnam, he went to Germany, to serve first as Commander of the 3d Armored Division Artillery from October 1967 until March 1969 and then as Division Chief of Staff for a year. He was promoted to colonel in November 1967. Vessey went back to South-

east Asia in December 1970 to head the US Army Support Command, Thailand. In January 1972 he went into Laos to coordinate all US military operations in support of the war in Laos. Vessey worked with the US ambassador, the CIA station chief, and an assortment of military contingents. When the Laotian ceasefire came in February 1973, the Royal Lao government controlled all major cities and the vast majority of the population.

Upon his return to the United States, Vessey became Director of Operations in the Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations and Plans. Promoted to major general in August 1974, he assumed command of the 4th Infantry Division (Mechanized) at Fort Carson, Colorado. Promoted to lieutenant general in September 1975, he became the Army's Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations and Plans.

Vessey received his fourth star in November 1976. From 1976 to 1979 he served in the Republic of Korea as Commanding General of the Eighth US Army; Commander of US Forces, Korea; and Commander in Chief of the United Nations Command. In 1978 he became the first Commander in Chief of the Republic of Korea-United States Combined Forces Command. His tour was marked by increased tension caused by evidence of a North Korean buildup and by President Jimmy Carter's 1977 announcement that US ground forces would be withdrawn. Vessey worked to assuage South Korean concerns and change the President's decision. After Carter's 1979 visit, withdrawal plans were suspended and then cancelled.

From July 1979 until June 1982 General Vessey served as Vice Chief of Staff of the Army. On 18 June 1982 he became the tenth Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the last World War II combat veteran to serve in the position. General Vessey was the only Chairman who had been neither a Service Chief nor a commander of a unified or specified command. He served as Chairman during a period of unprecedented growth in peacetime defense spending and an expanded US military presence worldwide intended to counter growing Soviet military power.

Vessey and the Service Chiefs believed that their overriding task lay in convincing Soviet leaders that their quest for military superiority and geostrategic advantage was

fruitless. In Europe, they pushed the controversial but successful deployment of Pershing II and ground-launched cruise missiles to offset the Soviet SS-20 missiles. In Southwest Asia, highly visible US military activities underscored the US commitment to defend its vital interests in the region. In Central America, training and intelligence were provided to support counterinsurgency efforts.

Believing that it was a mistake to commit a superpower's forces to a peacekeeping mission, Vessey and the Joint Chiefs in 1982 and 1983 advised against deployment of a Marine contingent to Lebanon as part of a multinational peacekeeping force intended to restore peace among warring factions there. Their advice was not taken, and on 23 October 1983 a terrorist attack on the Marine headquarters building in Beirut killed 241 Marines. In late February 1984 President Ronald Reagan withdrew the contingent from Lebanon.

Vessey stressed the need for improvement of war plans and, for the first time, JCS members along with commanders of unified and specified commands personally participated in war games. Realizing the need to strengthen the joint system, Vessey and the Service Chiefs improved Joint Staff operations by adding a capability for budgetary analysis and by improving the quality of its personnel, changes that did not require legislation.

Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger understood the importance of decentralization; he authorized Vessey to direct military operations on the Secretary's behalf. The 1983 Grenada operation, for example, was planned by Atlantic Command, reviewed by the JCS, and approved by Secretary Weinberger and the President—all in four days. Vessey oversaw execution of the operation that rescued US citizens and brought a pro-US government into power.

During Vessey's tenure there was increased emphasis on space as a theater of



General Vessey briefs President Ronald Reagan at the White House, 1985. *Left to right:* Donald Regan, White House Chief of Staff; Caspar W. Weinberger, Secretary of Defense; President Reagan; Vice President George Bush; Robert McFarlane, Assistant for National Security Affairs; and General Vessey.

operations. In early 1983 the Joint Chiefs mentioned to the President that defense against nuclear-armed missiles might be technically feasible in the next century. To their surprise, Reagan seized upon the concept and on 23 March 1983 announced his vision of the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI). Realizing the enormous military advantages to be gained from operations in space and to support SDI, the JCS recommended the establishment of a unified command for space. US Space Command was activated on 23 September 1985.

General Vessey retired on 30 September 1985, several months before the expiration of his second term as Chairman. He was the last

four-star World War II combat veteran on active duty and, with forty-six years of service, had served the longest of anyone then in the Army. Shortly after General Vessey's retirement, Secretary Weinberger appointed him to the Integrated Long Term Strategy Commission. Vessey also served President Reagan and his successors, Presidents George H. W. Bush and William J. Clinton, as a special emissary to Vietnam on the question of American service personnel missing from the Vietnam War. He was a long-term member of the Defense Policy Board and the Defense Science Board, chairing several of the latter's task forces and studies.

John William Vessey, Jr.

General, USA

Promotions	Dates	
	Temporary	Permanent
2LT	06 May 44	
1LT	01 Apr 46	13 Jun 51
CPT	04 Jan 51.	29 Oct 54
MAJ	14 May 58	26 Jan 62
LTC	07 Jan 63.	02 Jan 69
COL	28 Nov 67.	12 Mar 73
BG	01 Apr 71	23 Dec 74
MG	01 Aug 74.	23 Aug 76
LTG.	01 Sep 75	
GEN	01 Nov 76	

Assignments	Dates	
	From	To
National Guard enlisted service	1939	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).	1941	1945
US Army Field Artillery School, Fort Sill, OK	1945	1949
Student, Field Artillery Officers Advanced Course, Field Artillery School, Fort Sill, OK	1949	1950
Battery Officer; then Battery Commander, 18th Field Artillery, Fort Sill, OK	1950	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.	1951	1954
Student, Artillery Officer Advanced Course, Artillery and Guided Missile School, Fort Sill, OK.	1954	1955
Battery Commander, Artillery and Guided Missile School Officer Candidate School	1955	1956
Gunnery Instructor, Artillery and Guided Missile School, Fort Sill, OK	1956	1957
Student, US Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, KS	1957	1958
Artillery Section, Eighth US Army with duty station CINCPAC Coordination Center, Philippines . . .	1958	1958

Assignments	Dates	
	From	To
Chief, Operations Branch, Artillery Section, Eighth US Army, Korea	1958	1959
Assignment Officer, then Executive Officer, Artillery Officers Division, Office of Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel, Washington, DC.	1959	1963
Student, Armed Forces Staff College, Norfolk, VA.	1963	1963
Commander, 2d Battalion, 73d Artillery, 3d Armored Division, US Army, Europe	1963	1965
Student, Industrial College of the Armed Forces, Washington, DC	1965	1966
Executive Officer, 25th Infantry Division Artillery, Vietnam	1966	1967
Commander, 3d Armored Division Artillery, US Army, Europe.	1967	1969
Chief of Staff, 3d Armored Division, US Army, Europe.	1969	1970
Student, US Army Primary Helicopter School, Fort Wolters, TX; later US Army Aviation School, Fort Rucker, AL	1970	1970
Commanding General, US Army Support Command, Thailand	1970	1971
Deputy Chief, JUSMAGTHAI (Chief MAAG, Laos)	1972	1973
Director of Operations, Office Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations and Plans, Washington, DC.	1973	1974
Commanding General, 4th Infantry Division (Mechanized), Fort Carson, CO.	1974	1975
Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations and Plans, US Army, Washington, DC	1975	1976
Commanding General, Eighth US Army; and Commander in Chief, US Forces, Korea; and Commander in Chief, United Nations Command; and (1978) Commander in Chief, Republic of Korea-United States Combined Forces Command, Korea.	1976	1979
Vice Chief of Staff, US Army, Washington, DC	1979	1982
Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, Washington, DC.	1982	1985

Principal US Military Decorations and Qualifications

Distinguished Service Cross
Defense Distinguished Service Medal (with oak leaf cluster)
Army Distinguished Service Medal (with 2 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)
Air Medal (with 4 oak leaf clusters)
Joint Service Commendation Medal
Army Commendation Medal (with "V" device)
Purple Heart

Army Aviator