

## **General John W. Vessey, Jr.**

*Minnesota's top soldier*

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, 34<sup>th</sup> 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 34<sup>th</sup> 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. 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 US military operations until the cease-fire was signed in February 1973. In 1974, he was promoted to major general and given command of the 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division.

Upon promotion to Lieutenant General in 1975, Vessey became the US 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, US Forces, Korea; and Commanding General, Eighth US 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 recipient of numerous US 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.

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 supposed to last three months, took more than six years. He remains in demand as an advisor and speaker.

—*Jack K. Johnson, 1998, for the Military Historical Society of Minnesota*

*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. For more information go to [www.mnmilitarymuseum.org](http://www.mnmilitarymuseum.org)*