



Chief of the National Guard General Frank Grass meets with Retired General Jack Vessey, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, during visit to Camp Ripley, August 10, 2015 (DOD)

In Memoriam

General John W. Vessey, Jr., USA

By John Wagner

*Our strategy is one of preventing war by making it self-evident to our enemies
that they're going to get their clocks cleaned if they start one.*

—GENERAL VESSEY

We mourn the passing and celebrate the life and service of General John W. Vessey, Jr., the longest serving U.S. Soldier, who died on August 18, 2016, at the age of 94. He began his 46-year service by enlisting in the Minnesota Army

National Guard when he was just 16. General Vessey rose to the rank of first sergeant in World War II and received a battlefield commission as a second lieutenant in 1944 during the Battle of Anzio while serving as an artillery forward observer.

A combat veteran of World War II and Vietnam, General Vessey eventually became the 10th Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Nation's most senior military officer, from 1982 until his retirement in 1985. He was a recipient of the Distinguished Service Cross, Defense Distinguished Service Medal, along with Army, Navy, and Air Force Distinguished Service medals, Legion of Merit, Bronze Star, and Purple Heart, among numerous other decorations.

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At General Vessey's retirement ceremony, President Ronald Reagan exclaimed:

General Vessey will be remembered for many things: as a battlefield hero—you've heard today about North Africa, Monte Cassino, Anzio, and that grim night with the 2nd Battalion in Vietnam; he'll be remembered as a man of patriotism and deep religious belief, an officer who brought character and credit to every billet he ever held; as a military leader who always spoke his mind to civilian authority, respectfully but candidly; as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff who presided over the restoration of America's military strength and power at a moment critical to the fate of freedom and his country's security. In all these things, he bore the marks of greatness.¹

The President then highlighted why General Vessey was such an inspirational leader throughout his career, and why he will remain a role model for any future leader in or out of the military: "There's one accomplishment that is not there in Jack Vessey's personnel file, yet it's an accomplishment that made the difference in the lives of so many GIs over so many years in so many places around the globe. Jack Vessey always remembered the soldiers in the ranks; he understood those soldiers are the backbone of any army. He noticed them, spoke to them, looked out for them. Jack Vessey never forgot what it was like to be an enlisted man, to be just a GI."²

General Vessey was the last Chairman who served before the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986 transformed America's military organization and designated the Chairman as the principal military adviser to the President and Secretary of Defense. Thus, he was the last Chairman to have operational control of forces in the 1983 *Urgent Fury* operation that "rescued nearly 600 Americans and 120 foreigners, restored popular government to Grenada, and eliminated the potential strategic threat to U.S. lines of communication in the area."³

General Vessey also looked to the future—innovating, advocating, and activating two unified commands that would transform the American way of war and

be essential to the success of Operation *Desert Storm* less than a decade later. At the U.S. Central Command activation ceremony, he noted, "The Command is a signal to everyone concerned, friends and possible foes, that the United States has great interests in the region, that we stand ready to defend those interests and to help promote peace and stability in cooperation with our friends in the region."⁴ Just over 2 years later, at the U.S. Space Command activation ceremony, he remarked, "The United States Armed Forces use space systems to preserve national security by performing such functions as communications, weather forecasting, navigation, and warning. This new command will improve the use of current systems and will enhance planning for future use of these systems in these areas."⁵ The groundbreaking work begun in these two commands continues to improve our ability to fight and win the Nation's wars.

While he did not receive a college (bachelor's) degree until 1963 as a lieutenant colonel, General Vessey remained a continuous proponent of professional military education. He graduated from the Industrial College of the Armed Forces, predecessor to the Eisenhower School for National Security and Resource Strategy, in 1965. Eighteen years later, General Vessey urged, "I say to you that this new National Defense University must play a major role in keeping this a just nation justly armed. It must play its part in the preservation of peace. The quality of the education that the officers and civilian leaders get here will have a great deal to do with the defense decision-making in the years ahead."⁶

After retiring from the Army, President Reagan asked General Vessey to lead the efforts to account for military personnel listed as missing in action from the Vietnam War. As special emissary to Presidents Reagan, George H.W. Bush, and Bill Clinton, he made six trips to Vietnam to negotiate a number of issues with the Vietnamese government. General Vessey's efforts directly led to American search teams continuously on the ground in Vietnam and Cambodia since 1988 and Laos since 1991, along with occasional targeted investigations in China. To date,

these teams have identified and repatriated over a thousand Americans who were previously listed as prisoners of war or missing in action, returning them home for final closure with families and loved ones. For these efforts, President Bush awarded him the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1992 as a "Soldier-Statesman who would not leave anyone behind."

As we reflect on the life and service of this national hero, I believe General Vessey would side with President Reagan if there was just one thing that he would want us to remember about him: His concern for the American soldier, the "GI," was legendary in combat during two wars and throughout the entire Cold War. In his final words as Chairman, General Vessey remarked, "It occurred to me that probably the best thing to do here this morning was to give my fellow citizens the same charge that Saint Paul gave to the Hebrew Christians when he said, 'Let us run with perseverance the race that has been set before us.' And then just simply say, 'Thanks. Thanks, troops.'"

Thank you, General Vessey. JFQ

Notes

¹ Ronald Reagan, "Remarks at a Farewell Ceremony for General John W. Vessey, Jr., Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff," September 30, 1985, available at <www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=37816>.

² Ibid.

³ Ronald H. Cole, *Operation Urgent Fury: The Planning and Execution of Joint Operations in Grenada, 12 October–2 November 1983* (Washington, DC: Joint History Office, 1997), available at <www.dtic.mil/doctrine/doctrine/history/urgfury.pdf>.

⁴ John W. Vessey, Jr., "Remarks at the U.S. Central Command Activation Ceremony," in *Selected Works of General John W. Vessey, Jr., USA, Tenth Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 22 June 1982–30 September 1985* (Washington, DC: Joint History Office, 2008), available at <www.dtic.mil/doctrine/doctrine/history/vessey_speeches.pdf>.

⁵ John W. Vessey, Jr., "Remarks at the Activation of U.S. Space Command, Peterson Air Force Base, Colorado Springs, CO," in *Selected Works of General John W. Vessey, Jr.*

⁶ John W. Vessey, Jr., "Address to the National Defense University Foundation, Fort McNair, Washington, DC," in *Selected Works of General John W. Vessey, Jr.*