

William Weston Bessell, Jr.

- Born 17 May 1901
- 14 Jun 1918-15 Jun 1920: Cadet at USMA; promoted to Second Lieutenant in Corps of Engineers upon graduation
- May 1921-Jun 1922: Student, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Troy, New York
- May 1923-Aug 1928: Professor of Military Science, Rose Polytechnic Institute, Terre Haute, Indiana
- Aug 1928-Sep 1932: Assistant Professor of Mathematics, USMA
- Oct 1936-Sep 1939: American Battle Monuments Commission, Paris, France
- Jul 1940-Dec 1942: Chief of Military Personnel Branch, Office of the Chief Engineer, Washington, D.C.
- Apr 1943-Mar 1946: Army Director, Joint War Plans Committee
- Mar 1946-Jul 1947: Commanding General, Antilles Department, San Juan, Puerto Rico
- Sep 1947-Sep 1959: Professor of Mathematics, Head of the Mathematics Department, USMA
- Sep 1959-May 1965: Dean of the Academic Board, USMA
- Died 13 Jan 1977, age 76

William Weston Bessell, Junior, was born in San Juan, Puerto Rico on 17 May 1901. His father retired as a Colonel after coming up through the enlisted ranks with the 7th Regiment of New York. Bessell was appointed to the United States Military Academy from the United States at large by President Woodrow Wilson while residing at Mesa, Arizona. When he entered the Academy on 14 June 1918, USMA was in turmoil. Due to the United States participation in World War I, the original classes of 1920 and 1921 graduated on 1 November 1918. Fourth Classman Bessell immediately became a cadet lieutenant. With the signing of the Armistice on 11 November 1918, the original class of 1921 was recalled to West Point and given an additional six months of schooling. Although still in his first year, Cadet Bessell became the Regimental Adjutant, the position he retained throughout the following year, but as a cadet captain, the second ranking cadet in the Corps. On 15 June 1920, after being at West Point for just two years, Cadet Bessell graduated sixth in a class of two hundred seventy-one. Upon graduation, he was promoted to the ranks of Second and First Lieutenant in the Corps of Engineers.

Lieutenant Bessell's first assignment was at the Engineer School at Camp Humphreys, Virginia, from which he graduated in January 1921. He remained there to serve as the Regimental Supply Officer for the 13th Engineers. From May 1921 to June 1922, he was a student officer at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, graduating with the Degree of Civil Engineering. Lieutenant Bessell stood first in his class that included, in addition to a full complement of civilian students, 28 other Engineer officers. It was at RPI that he was elected to the Honorary Engineering Society of Sigma Xi.

In August 1922, Lieutenant Bessell reported to Camp Travis, Texas where he served as Company Officer and Adjutant with the 2d Engineers of the 2d Division. He remained there until May 1924 when he was assigned to the Reserve Officers Training Corps at Rose Polytechnic Institute, Terre Haute, Indiana. Lieutenant Bessell was appointed Professor of Military Science

and Tactics at the school in February 1927. He served in this capacity until August 1928 when he reported to West Point as an Assistant Professor of Mathematics in charge of Third Class Mathematics.

From September 1932 to November 1934, Lieutenant Bessell was on foreign service in Hawaii where he served as Engineer Supply Officer, Hawaii Engineer Depot and as Operations Officer and Plans and Training Officer of the 3rd Engineers. For the next two years he was assigned to the Engineer Office, Zanesville, Ohio. During this period he was in charge of the preliminary survey and design of the Bolivar Dam, Bolivar, Ohio, and served as the Resident Engineer for the construction of that dam.

Captain Bessell's next tour, from October 1936 to September 1939, with the American Battle Monuments Commission, gained for him the French Legion of Honor, with the famous Marshall Petain himself pinning the award. In this position, he was charged with the supervision of the additional construction and maintenance of the eleven United States World War I monuments and memorials and eight military cemeteries where American soldiers were buried throughout Europe. In September 1939, he was assigned to duty at the Command and General Staff School, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, graduating in February 1940. He was then assigned as Assistant Chief of Staff G-1, of the IV Corps and the Sixth Army then engaged in the Fort Benning and Louisiana maneuvers.

In July 1940, Major Bessell was assigned as Chief of the Military Personnel Branch, Office of the Chief of Engineers, Washington, D.C. At the outbreak of World War II, in December 1941, Lieutenant Colonel Bessell was tasked to implement a program that would create and train the engineer amphibious brigades. These units would ultimately prove vital to the island hopping campaigns in the Pacific and in the invasions of Africa, Italy, and France. His crash programs raised the strength of the Corps of Engineers in one year from 800 to 22,000 officers and from 10,000 to 311,000 enlisted men.

From December 1942 until April 1943, Colonel Bessell served on the War Department General Staff with the Strategy Section of the Operations Division. In April 1943, Colonel Bessell assisted in the organization of the Joint War Plans Committee, an agency charged with anticipating the conduct of war and with preparing campaign plans well in advance of their probable need. In his capacity as Army Director of the committee, Colonel Bessell was promoted to Brigadier General and was a participant during the years 1943-1945 at the wartime Allied Staff Conferences. From September 1945 until January 1946, he was Chairman of the Postwar Personnel Planning Board, a committee tasked to recommend the strength, composition, and location of the postwar Army and Air Force.

In March 1945, General Bessell was assigned as the Commanding General at the station where he was born, San Juan, Puerto Rico. His Antilles Department, a part of the Caribbean Command stretched 2500 miles from the Guianas through Cuba. General Bessell changed command in August 1947 as he was for a second time assigned to West Point.

Having been a general officer for three years, General Bessell voluntarily relinquished that rank to accept membership in the Corps of Professors, USMA. On 1 September 1947, Colonel Bessell

was named Head of Mathematics Department. One of Colonel Bessell's first acts in this new position was to offer a course in Probability and Statistical Analysis to all cadets, rather than limit it to only upper section cadets as had been done previously. "Through his decision alone, he placed the Military Academy at least a decade ahead of most American colleges in this important aspect of modern mathematics." Colonel Bessell was very cognizant of the importance and value of using audio-visual aids in improving teaching methods. He saw to it that each mathematics classroom had an overhead projector in it. He was also able to procure mechanical computers to support the instruction in his department. Colonel Bessell's strong associations with the Mathematical Association of America and other prominent national mathematics associations were instrumental in ensuring that the Academy's mathematics programs not only met the growing needs of the science and engineering disciplines, but also kept abreast of the rapid development in the teaching of mathematics. Colonel Bessell's first love was teaching in the classroom. Colonel Bessell, years after his retirement stated, "When I come back and talk to some of the men I have taught at West Point, and they say how much they remember my teaching, I have my proudest moments...When I look at it all, I would have to say that makes me the proudest."

As Chief of the Academic Building Committee, Colonel Bessell was largely responsible that Thayer Hall was equipped with the latest advances in teaching technology. This facility was one of the most modern and completely equipped classroom buildings on any campus in America. Colonel Bessell was also a very key figure in the Academy's decision to adopt the College Entrance Examination Board's test as the means for testing candidates in place of the locally prepared West Point Qualification Test formerly used. His recognized leadership in the field of college admissions led to his being invited to serve as a three year trustee of the College Entrance Examination Board.

On 1 October 1959, Colonel Bessell was once again promoted to Brigadier General as he was appointed Dean of the Academic Board. He served in this capacity until June 1965. As the Dean, he had the opportunity to make several monumental, significant contributions to the Academy. General Bessell implemented a revised USMA curriculum that allowed cadets to choose from ninety-two elective courses under a controlled electives program. This revised curriculum had a significant impact on the needed qualifications of the faculty. General Bessell saw to it that incoming faculty members were given the opportunity for advanced studies at civilian universities. In January 1963, at General Bessell's insistence, an academic computer center was opened with the installation of four digital computers. During his tenure as Dean, the Library grew from 160,000 to 250,000 volumes with a one hundred percent increase in the circulation of books among cadets during this period.

In 1960 and 1965, General Bessell was honored with Doctor of Engineering Honorary Degrees from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and Rose Polytechnic Institute respectively. "Throughout his military career, General Bessell demonstrated exceptional military leadership, scholastic excellence, and professional ability. His resourcefulness, integrity, and dedication made him a valuable staff member, a trusted leader, and an outstanding Dean of the Academic Board at the Military Academy." On 1 June 1965, Brigadier General William Weston Bessell, Junior, retired as Dean of the Academic Board after spending twenty-four of his forty-seven years of active service at West Point.

Publications:

"The Making of Teachers at West Point," Assembly, Volume 17, Spring 1958, page 20.

References:

Adams, Charles, "Bessell, Fifth in Line of USMA's Academic Deans Retires", Assembly, Volume 24, Spring 1965, pg 2

Cullum's Register, Volume VII, page 1549.

"General Bessell, former USMA Dean", The News of the Highlands, 20 January 1977.

West Point General Orders #54, 12 May 1965.

Who's Who In America, Volume 27, 1952-1953.