James Hobson Stratton

1898–1984

By Wilson Binger

James Hobson Stratton, retired brigadier general in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and partner in the engineering and architectural consulting firm of Tippetts-Abbett-McCarthy-Stratton in New York, died of congestive heart failure on March 16, 1984, at the age of eighty-five. Thus ended a noteworthy professional engineering career, marked by General Stratton's direction of a number of major civil and military engineering projects.

Stratton was born in Stonington, Connecticut, on June 7, 1898; he attended public schools in Paterson, New Jersey, where his family had subsequently moved. After the outbreak of World War I and the declaration of war by the United States, Stratton enlisted in the National Guard; shortly thereafter, however, he was discharged to enter the U.S. Army Military Academy at West Point. Upon graduation, he transferred to the Corps of Engineers.

During his pre-World War II years with the corps, Stratton was assigned to various district engineering offices. It was during these tours that he became acquainted with the importance of soil mechanics in the design and construction of earth dams and later with the construction of military airfields. More than any other engineering officer at that time, Stratton acted as a catalyst to incorporate the young science of soil mechanics into the project development activities of the corps.
James Stratton encouraged engineers to develop their skills and, through his leadership and expertise, provided them with an example. His work had a major impact on the design and construction of dams at Denison, Texas; Franklin Falls, New Hampshire; and Conchas, New Mexico; and of the locks and dams on the upper Mississippi River. In addition, he assumed a major role in the design and construction of the airfield and flood control works at Caddoa, Colorado, including the John Martin Dam.

At the onset of World War II, James Stratton was assigned to the Office of the Chief of Engineers. In this capacity, Stratton was given responsibility for the engineering, planning, and design of those facilities related to the extensive military construction program that had devolved upon the corps—as well as the responsibility for the somewhat curtailed Civil Works Program. As the selected representative of the chief of engineers, James Stratton participated in the initial engineering-related planning of the landing operation on the north coast of France in 1944.

In September 1943 he was assigned to the European theater of operations as a G4 in the Communications Zone; he was stationed in London until being assigned to France in July 1944. For his wartime services, General Stratton was awarded the Legion of Merit (1944) and the Distinguished Service Medal (1945). As the end of hostilities neared, he returned to the United States for an assignment as assistant chief of engineers. In this role he was responsible for reactivating the Civil Works Program of the corps, which played an important part in reducing unemployment following the end of the war and the demobilization of the armed forces.

With the passage of Public Law 280, the seventy-ninth U.S. Congress provided for a study of the future Panama Canal. Consequently, in early 1946 Stratton was named special engineering assistant to the governor of the Panama Canal and placed in charge of the investigation and study of the Isthmian Canal. Years later, the results of these preliminary studies established an invaluable basis for the more comprehensive Sea Level Canal Studies program.
General Stratton's position of special engineering assistant served far more than merely an administrative or even an executive function, for his leadership role of managing a group of 150 engineers and geologists was a highly technical assignment. General Stratton had the vision, creativity, and attention to detail to ensure that the Panama Canal study was thorough, well grounded in the technology of the time, and supported by complete investigations in geology, soil mechanics, hydrology and hydraulics, economics, urban planning, and military and naval sciences.

He completed this duty in mid-1948. His final active duty assignment was as the New England division engineer at Boston, Massachusetts, following which, in 1949, after thirty years of service, he chose to retire with the rank of brigadier general.

Stratton then joined the engineering and architectural consulting firm in New York that had been founded many years before by his West Point classmate Theodore T. Knappen. After the death of Knappen in 1951, the firm's name was changed to Tippetts-Abbett-McCarthy-Stratton. As a partner, Stratton was responsible for many of the firm's major dam projects; for a number of highway, port, harbor, and airport construction projects; and for numerous feasibility studies, all of which were successfully completed in many of the fifty countries in which the firm was active. He retired from the firm in January 1967.

Following his retirement from military service, General Stratton was active in community affairs and for seven years was a member of the board of education in Englewood, New Jersey. He was also a member of the Special Curricula Committee, which was appointed to advise the dean of the Department of Civil and Sanitary Engineering at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) regarding courses of study for enrolled undergraduates. In addition, for three years General Stratton served as a member of the board of visitors, which met annually to advise this same MIT department on substantive matters significant to the fulfillment of the purposes for which MIT had been established.
Among his technical publications was an article on military airfields, published in 1945 by the American Society of Civil Engineers, for which Stratton was awarded the society's Arthur Wellington Prize. He was also a contributing author to the *Handbook of Applied Hydraulics*, edited by Calvin Davis, and *American Civil Engineering Practice*, edited by Robert W. Abbett.

Stratton was a member of Theta Xi fraternity at the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, and he was a Mason. His professional society affiliations included the Society of American Military Engineers, the American Society of Civil Engineers, the Boston Society of Engineers, and the American Institute of Consulting Engineers. He was elected to the National Academy of Engineering in 1981. General Stratton held professional licenses in eighteen states.

In addition to his personal professional accomplishments, Stratton provided firm leadership to his associates. He was particularly generous in the encouragement, guidance, and support of younger engineers, to whom Stratton believed in giving responsibility. When he himself was in his sixties, he said to a friend in his firm, "What's wrong with the world is that the leaders are old men, and I mean men of my age!"