

Wilbur “Will” J. Mathias

Veterans and the U.S. Census Bureau

The U.S. Census Bureau has always been a home to veterans of the United States Armed Forces. The first superintendent of the census, William Augustus Weaver, appointed in 1840, received wounds as a combat veteran in the War of 1812. Francis Amasa Walker, the highly influential superintendent of the 1880 Census was a veteran of the Civil War and former prisoner of war. In 1890, census legislation made it clear that honorably discharged veterans of the armed services would receive preference for employment as enumerators—a practice that continues to this day and one that has been further strengthened and expanded through civil service reforms. In 2015, for instance, the Department of Commerce, to which the Census Bureau belongs, employed 5,684 veterans (12 percent). Throughout the history of the Census Bureau, agency employees proudly served in America’s conflicts and the Korean War, from 1950 to 1953, was no exception.

During the Korean War, Census Bureau employee and Air Force reservist Wilbur “Will” J. Mathias received the call to return to active duty. Born on January 2, 1921, in Altoona, PA, Will’s father, Harry, managed a grocery. In

Mathias Family, 1930 Census

the 1930s, the family moved to Dundalk, MD, and later to Baltimore, MD, where Will graduated from Strayer Business College. On July 8, 1940, Will started work at the Census Bureau, however, with the start of World War II, he enlisted in the Army Air Corps in the spring of 1942. After graduating from Selman Air Field Navigator’s Class in Monroe, LA, in the summer of 1943, he was deployed to Europe. As a navigator, Will participated in a 1,000-plane raid on Berlin on March 6, 1944. During the raid, his plane received damage and landed in neutral Sweden—where the crew became detainees for the remainder of the war. Following the end of the war, Will served as a drone pilot in the 1946 Bikini Atoll nuclear tests and guided these unmanned, remote control planes through the atomic clouds in order to observe the blast from the air. He is credited as the first person to navigate a drone over the Pacific Ocean.

In 1947, Will returned to his job at the Census Bureau, where he worked in the Governments Division. During this same year, he met fellow Census Bureau employee, Elizabeth “Bette” Christensen, who worked in the Personnel Division. On August 30, 1948, Will and Bette married in Litchfield, MI. Bette continued working at the Census Bureau until 1950, when she and Will had the first of their seven children.



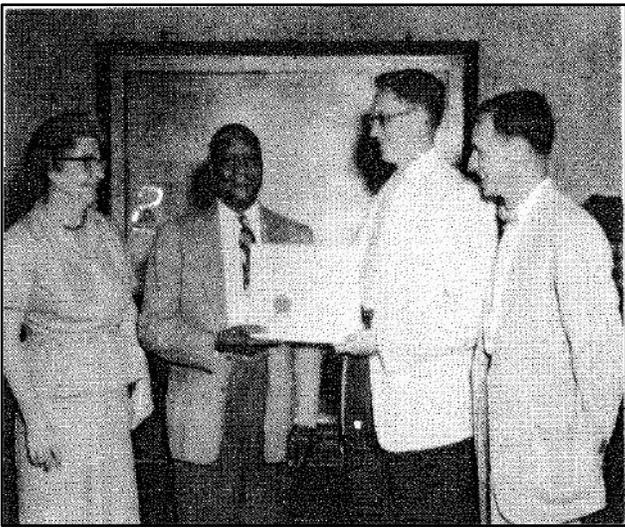
Captain Mathias with daughter Jeanne

The Honolulu Star Bulletin
(Honolulu, HI) 9 Nov 1950



**Will and Bette on their wedding day,
30 August 1948**

Catholic Standard (Washington, DC) 1 Oct 2008



Will (on the right) watches as one of his Personnel Division employees, Alexander Lucas, Jr., receives an award for a suggestion

Census Bulletin (Census Bureau Publication) Aug 1958

veterans would receive preference in hiring also enabled veterans to return to previously held jobs. Upon his return, Will devoted himself to his duties—he earned multiple awards for receiving “Outstanding” ratings on his performance evaluations and in 1955, the director appointed Will to help run the awards program. He also served on the credit committee as a benefits collector and a tax assistant.

Will received multiple promotions. He was an assistant administrative officer in the Personnel Division, chief of the Operations Branch, an administrative officer for the Personnel Division, and finally, chief of the Management Control Branch in the Economic Operations Division. In 1963, Will moved to the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) where he worked in a variety of leadership roles, including Branch Chief of Systems Analysis, Branch Chief of Publications and Graphics Systems, and Branch Chief of Management Information Systems. Throughout his professional career, Will remained a member of the AFRC, retiring in 1971 with the rank of Lieutenant Colonel after almost 30 years of service.

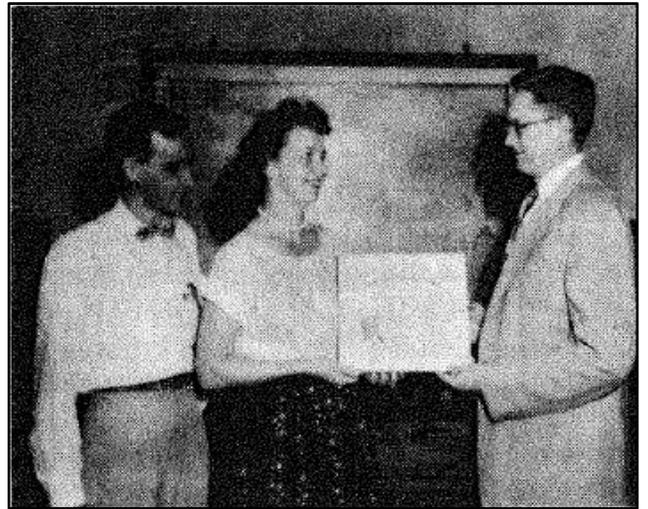


Will and Bette at their 60th Anniversary, 2008

In 1973, Will retired from the FAA after 33 years of civil government employment. Will and Bette, whose relationship began at the Census Bureau, celebrated their 60th anniversary together in 2008. Will passed away on December 11, 2008. He dedicated his life to his country, not just in war, but also in peace. Will spent his career helping his fellow employees, and when duty called him to face danger he never shied away. The Census Bureau is proud to count Lt Co Wilbur J. Mathias as one of our many veterans who have answered the call over the years.

In 1948, Will took part in the competitive Administrative Intern program. In 1949, Census Bureau Director Ross Eckler appointed him treasurer of the Census Bureau’s Welfare Fund. The Korean War began when the North Korean Army invaded South Korea on June 25, 1950. As part of the United States Air Force Reserves (AFRC), Will returned to active duty. From the fall of 1950 until the summer of 1952, he worked on flight crews ferrying men and equipment from Hawaii to Japan and transporting desperately needed men and supplies to the battlefield.

Will returned to the Census Bureau in July 1952 as an assistant administrative officer in the Personnel Division. The same civil service reforms ensuring



Will (on the left) watches one of his Personnel Division employees, Edna Pavol, receive an award for a suggestion

Census Bulletin (Census Bureau Publication) Aug 1958