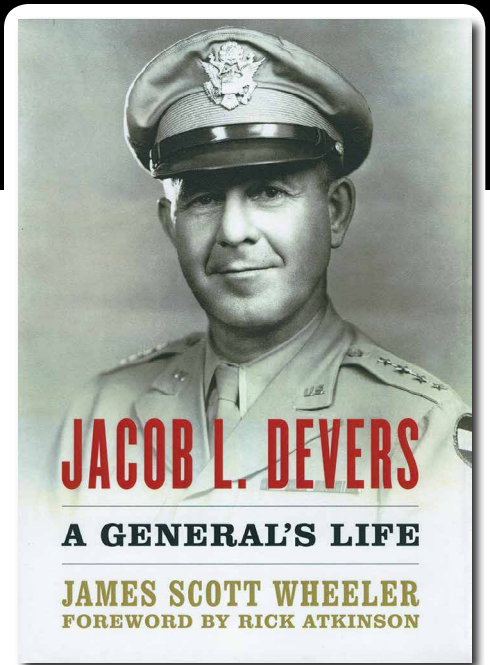


Jacob L. Devers A General's Life

James Scott Wheeler, University Press of Kentucky,
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The guiding theme for Scott Wheeler's study on U.S. Army Gen. Jacob "Jake" L. Devers appears on the first page of this long overdue biography: "So, why is Jacob Devers a forgotten general?" Why, indeed? Devers finished World War II as a four-star general, like George Patton. He commanded one of only three Allied army groups in Europe, the Sixth Army Group, composed of one U.S. army and one French army. These facts alone should cause one to ask why he is not more widely remembered, especially since he was not relieved of command, nor did he suffer any defeats at the hands of the German forces he faced while in command.

Wheeler's book, therefore, follows the trend of revising the established scholarship about World War II—in this case, the scholarship on high command. The method is that of a traditional biography—birth to death. Devers's early years are covered in the traditional manner of tracing family roots and discussing those that influenced him most. For

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example, one of Devers's early character traits is his "puritanical" and countercultural aversion to alcohol and tobacco, which could be attributed to his mother Ella, and was noted "by his classmates at West Point."

Devers entered the artillery branch after

graduation from West Point, serving in the pre-World War I Army in various postings. He was lucky enough to command three different types of artillery units: mountain artillery (using mules), regular horse-drawn artillery, and one of the first motorized artillery battalions. He missed a posting to France during World War I, having been deemed more important to the training effort of the many artillery officers at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, who were needed for the massive expansion of that combat arm during the war. Like Dwight Eisenhower, however, missing the "big show" in Europe did not seem to hurt his subsequent career, despite his concern that it would do just that.

The bulk of Wheeler's book concentrates on the critical period before and during World War II, and Devers's role as one of Gen. George C. Marshall's "go to guys." Devers's career was also helped by his long association and friendship with fellow artilleryman Gen. Leslie McNair, another one of Marshall's protégés and troubleshooters. McNair became the American Ground Forces commander and Devers's boss when he assumed overall command of the new Armored Force of the U.S. Army. In this section the reader learns of the numerous occasions in which Devers conflicted with Eisenhower, especially during Devers's 1943 trip to Africa, when Eisenhower probably believed Devers had been sent to relieve him. And, the section on Devers's command of the Sixth Army Group and the challenges of commanding a French unit is especially enlightening for anyone interested in high command in coalition warfare.

Devers's character emerges throughout the text in Wheeler's "just the facts ma'am" approach to his subject. The very sparseness of the prose, and its lack of hagiographic commentary, highlights this remarkable man's integrity and generosity. For example, when Devers moved with his family to West Point after World War I to serve on the faculty, we learn that he and his wife Georgie had employed a former sergeant's wife, a part-Cherokee woman, as a servant in their quarters at Fort Sill. Wheeler does not embellish this, but we learn she had been divorced before the move, and it seems clear that Jacob and Georgie Devers were employing, in today's vernacular, a single mother with three young daughters to feed. We then learn that the couple moved this woman and her daughters into their home at West Point and took care of them until the woman married another sergeant.

Wheeler also makes clear throughout the book that Devers had no aversions to expecting much from his own family. Devers' long work hours and long separations must have been hard on his wife and daughter, but they too "soldiered on." This attitude reflects a different age, when military careerists like Devers were expected to put the Army and the Nation first and their families second. Devers was no different from his peers in this respect, but his easy-going, problem-solving nature is at the heart of Wheeler's thesis. Devers's willingness to solve the most difficult problems, and to maintain a sort of ruthless cheerfulness while he did it, rubbed others the wrong way, especially men like Eisenhower, Omar Bradley, and Patton.

Wheeler's minimalist approach even applies to his selection of photographs for the book. In one, Devers holds a trophy as a member of the War Department Polo Team. Next to him, with a stone face, if not a grimace, is Patton. Devers, on the other hand, presents his usual "smiling Jake" persona, accepting the trophy and looking like the most relaxed, comfortable person in the world. It is no wonder that he created a Cassius-like cadre who envied and begrudged him his success and ever-present cheerfulness.

An area in which Devers normally gets little credit is artillery development in the interwar period. Most U.S. military historians agree on the excellence of American

artillery equipment, tactics, and procedures before and during World War II. Dr. Jonathan House wrote, "Between 1929 and 1941, a series of instructors at the Field Artillery School [at Fort Sill] gradually developed a means of concentrating any amount of available artillery fire on a target of opportunity. ... Fire direction centers gave the U.S. Army a new and unprecedented degree of infantry-artillery integration."¹ After Devers's graduation from the Command and General Staff School, he reported to that very artillery school and served there until 1929. Wheeler argues that later innovators built on the foundational work of instructors who included Devers, which allowed this "unprecedented" application of firepower on the modern battlefield. Devers later commanded the Armored Force in the first years of World War II and proved instrumental in the adoption and introduction of the excellent 105 mm self-propelled artillery gun known as the "Priest" into the U.S. inventory.

Throughout the book, Wheeler maintains an objective tone about his subject and does not give in to "hero-worship" prose. However, by the end of the book, the reader has a clear idea about why Devers has been forgotten in the narrative of World War II. That he never wrote a self-serving autobiography reflects his "team" approach to things; he would emphasize the accomplishments of his subordinates and teams over highlighting his own achievements. One reason, perhaps, that Devers rubbed his contemporaries the wrong way is revealed in this passage by Wheeler at the end of the book: "Jacob Devers did not forget his boyhood friends or community. He did not cheat on his wife. He did not blame his subordinates for his own mistakes or failures. He was not ... disloyal to his superior officers. He did not forget to take care of those who served him." The standard he set for himself separated him from his peers.

Devers lived an extremely long and healthy life, dying at ninety-two, but he never felt compelled to set the record straight, probably because he was happy with four stars and secure in the knowledge of his contributions to victory in World War II. Wheeler's book is highly recommended for all history audiences—an extraordinary story about an extraordinary man who simply did not see himself that way. ■

Note

1. Jonathan M. House, *Toward Combined Arms Warfare: A Survey of 20th Century Tactics, Doctrine, and Organization*,

Research Survey No. 2 (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 1984), 75.