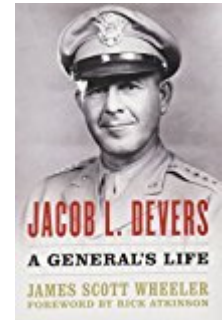


James Scott Wheeler. *Jacob L. Devers: A General's Life.* American Warrior Series. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2015. 616 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8131-6602-5.



Reviewed by Marc Blackburn (Mount Rainier National Park)

Published on H-War (December, 2016)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

World War II biographies are overwhelmed with accounts of the primary movers and shakers who led the war effort on the Allied side—such as Dwight D. Eisenhower, George S. Patton, and George C. Marshall. But there are many other notable figures who deserve attention. James Scott Wheeler adds to a growing number of biographies that tackle the next level of responsibility—army and army group commanders, staff officers, and corps commanders. Composite biographies of division and corps commanders have been published, but many key personalities have not attracted individual biographies. In the last few years, Mark T. Calhoun has published a much-needed biography of Lesley J. McNair (*General Lesley J. McNair: Unsung Architect of the US Army* [2015]) and Kevin C. Holzimmer has written a work on Walter Krueger (*General Walter Krueger: Unsung Hero of the Pacific War* [2007]), just to name two studies that have focused on individuals.

Biography is, perhaps, one of the most time-honored genres of history that ties key individuals to the larger context of the times in which they

lived. When the materials are available, authors usually find a way to balance context and the life of the person. Wheeler admirably succeeds in this regard, balancing the details of General Jacob L. Devers's life and accomplishments and his larger place in the world. A rich collection of personal and professional papers provides a compelling portrait of a key player in the European theater of operations during World War II. The heart of the book covers Devers's World War II service, but, as most biographers do, the author starts at the roots of his subject's career and carries the narrative to the end of his life.

Born on September 8, 1887, Devers grew up in south central Pennsylvania. He excelled as an athlete in high school and developed traits that he later displayed for most of his professional career: integrity, a capacity for hard work, and a knack for displaying leadership were seemingly an innate part of his personality. Upon entering the United States Military Academy at West Point, he proved to be an excellent athlete and continued to work hard, graduating in 1909, 39th out of 103. He

entered the field artillery and served diligently in a number of assignments prior to World War I. While serving at Fort DA Russell, he came into contact with McNair while experimenting with pack artillery. This contact served Devers well when McNair became commanding general of the Army Ground Forces during World War II. Moreover, he developed character traits that defined his service. First, he maintained good working relationships with his subordinates, and second, he tended to speak up or perhaps out, irritating those officers senior to him. Devers was plainspoken and stood his ground when he was right, but tended to do it in a manner that often irritated his superiors. Regardless, his early career pointed to a competent officer who attracted the attention of those who served with him and around him.

Prior to the United States' entrance into the First World War, Devers returned to West Point as an instructor and then went to serve in Hawaii. His skills as a trainer of men caught the attention of his superiors. Like his contemporary Eisenhower, Devers remained in the continental United States at Fort Sill training troops for service in the field artillery. To his credit, the author briefly explores Devers's experiences navigating the complex racial politics of the era with the training of personnel from the 92nd Division. Devers's tendency to be even-handed and to look after the needs of his men and subordinates seems to be the dominant trait as opposed to a knee-jerk racist response. Unlike Eisenhower, in the aftermath of the armistice, Devers did go to Europe for training and observation, but did not participate in any fighting.

The officers who led the United States Army in the Second World War came of age in the interwar period. This critical period demands a great deal of attention. An emphasis on training and professional development for the officer corps, which came at the expense of modernizing combat arms, was one of the keys for American successes. The

traits that Devers displayed in the first years of his military career were honed in the twenty years between the two world wars. His service with troops and in staff positions brought forth Devers's no-nonsense leadership style as well as his consistent ability to get to the heart of an issue and build a consensus around his decisions. The decade of the 1920s began with another stint at West Point, followed by an invitation to attend the General Staff School at Fort Leavenworth. He was a good student and sharpened his leadership skills in the demanding academic environment.

With further assignments at Fort Sill and in the office of the chief of artillery in 1928, Devers deserves credit for laying the groundwork for many of the changes that would make American artillery the king of the battlefield during the Second World War. Moreover, while serving in a staff position in Washington, DC, with the chief of artillery, Devers became well versed in motorization. He demonstrated expertise in the motor vehicle industry and his congenial personality allowed him to work with other branches without stirring up inter-service rivalries that the National Defense Act of 1920 exacerbated. During his stint at the Army War College, he continued to hone his expertise in motorization and built relationships in the industry that would serve him well when he became the head of the armor branch at the beginning of the war. One interesting observation that the author makes, which foreshadows some of Devers's challenges when dealing with Eisenhower, is related to his service with troops. For three years, he served with two field artillery battalions, balancing his skills as a staff officer and a leader of men, something that was missing in Eisenhower's service record in the interwar period. Given Devers's consistently positive performance reports, it seems a foregone conclusion that he would have the knowledge, skills, and abilities to become a corps or army commander.

As the 1930s came to a close, Devers returned to West Point and became involved in the

academy's athletic programs where he showed off his skills in identifying skilled people and shaping them into high-performing athletes. His attention to detail, skills in training men, and ability to lead caught the attention of Marshall. Marshall's skills in recognizing talent throughout the officer corps is well known and documented. His little black book could essentially make a person's career. After West Point, Devers was sent to the Panama Canal Zone to serve as chief of staff where he also caught the attention of McNair. Their careers intersected in the years before World War I, and with McNair's responsibilities as the commanding general of General Headquarters, McNair took note of Devers's abilities to navigate the difficult waters of inter-service rivalry that characterized the canal zone. As tensions rose in Europe, the capabilities to defend the Panama Canal were expanded and led by Devers. Having to work with the navy and air corps, Devers built working relationships with other combat arms and services, abilities that were noted by Marshall and McNair and that propelled his career forward as the country made the transition between peace and war.

Being in the good graces of both McNair and Marshall, Devers served in several pivotal positions before he went to Europe and army group command. The tone of the biography at this point paints a picture of a man who could do no harm. His positions included a brigade commander in Washington, DC, and a staff officer on a base selection committee, and he led the training of the 9th Infantry Division. These assignments indicated a continued skill in working with civilians and soldiers alike in finding solutions and continued to exceed expectations in leading the training of men. It was these skills and his previous interest in motorization that moved him to the Armored Force. In the aftermath of the German victories in Western Europe, the Armored Force was an attempt to blend the tank programs of the infantry and cavalry into one cohesive force. Devers was able to bridge the gap between the parochial views of the infantry and cavalry, blending them

into a more cohesive force. He shuffled personnel, recognizing those (like Patton) who had the makings of a great commander. He emerged as a peacemaker with the ability to identify talent. Devers's ability to placate and work with difficult personalities is one of the traits that emerges throughout this biography. His connections to the automotive industry paid dividends as he was able to work with contractors to iron out production issues of the M4. With the disbandment of General Headquarters and the creation of the Army Ground Force, with McNair as the commanding general, the Armored Force became a training command and set up the conditions for the next step in his career.

The remaining chapters on World War II, again a substantial part of this book, transition to Devers's actions in the Mediterranean and Europe. Devers's abilities had captured the eye of Chief of Staff Marshall. With the difficulties encountered in Tunisia in the aftermath of Operation TORCH, Marshall sent Devers on a fact-finding trip. This is where we get our first glimpse of the difficult relationship between Devers and Eisenhower. The author characterizes Devers as a peacemaker with strong opinions who, when needed, could work with and placate strong personalities. Overwrought with difficult responsibilities as a theater commander of recalcitrant French and British Allies, Eisenhower was well aware of how his superiors were perceiving his actions and performance. Devers's observation mission was seen by Eisenhower as a "spy" mission, which colored their relationship for the remainder of the war. While it is refreshing to recognize Eisenhower's complex personality, the tone that Wheeler takes seems to put Eisenhower in a negative, even petty light. Acknowledging that Eisenhower was brilliant in melding a working alliance, in terms of his relationships with his subordinates, Wheeler often portrays him as petty and as jealous of the relationships that Devers built with his subordinates. Is this a fair characterization? Perhaps. Eisenhower was certainly able to repair his relation-

ships over time, but he also emerges as a less than sympathetic commander.

Devers's success in the Mediterranean brought his next assignment, albeit temporary, as the commander of the European theater of operations following the death of Frank Andrews in a plane crash. He came at a critical time during the build-up of American forces in Great Britain and the growing strategic air campaign against German economic targets. With a pull of resources into the Mediterranean, Devers faced the political pressures of dealing the "suck" of resources into a theater that the British wanted but the Americans did not. For a brief time, this put him in further conflict with Eisenhower. Moreover, when Eisenhower, rather than Marshall, was named commander of the European theater, Devers was shifted to the Mediterranean as deputy commander of the theater and commander of all American forces. Disappointed that he could not remain in Western Europe, he inherited a theater commander, Mark Clark, and a strategic plan that he could not greatly influence. Perhaps because of his previous experience with ground troops, he built excellent relationships with the French and was able to promote effective combat leaders in the aftermath of the failures at Anzio. In spite of these challenges, Devers was given command of the Sixth Army Group for the landings in southern France.

The disagreements between Devers and Eisenhower persisted. One of the strengths of Devers, and the strongest contrast to Eisenhower, was his ability to work with the French in contrast to Eisenhower's prickly relationship with Bernard Montgomery. Moreover, with the challenges of breaking out of the Normandy lodgment, Eisenhower did not devote the time to create a coherent strategic vision of how to use the forces coming from the South except in the broadest terms. Regardless, Devers used his forces to their greatest effect, sweeping southern France of German forces and linking up with the forces coming

across central France. Following the successes of the initial breakout across France, Devers faced the same logistical challenges as his peers, slowing the advance to a crawl but creating new opportunities as the armies settled on the frontiers of France and Germany. Given the location of his army group in Alsace and his relative proximity to the Rhine in the late fall of 1944, Devers pushed for a crossing of the Rhine. Wheeler faults Eisenhower for failing to effectively communicate his broad front strategy to Devers, prompting further difficulties between the two men. While historians characterize Eisenhower's veto as a lost opportunity, Wheeler recognizes that in spite of Devers's optimism, he had his hands full with the Colmar salient and the inability of the French to effectively eliminate this salient in his line.

The subsequent challenges of meeting the German offensive in the Ardennes, the so-called Battle of the Bulge, would bring the relationship between Eisenhower and Devers to its nadir. The French forces under Devers's command had bled themselves white in battling the Colmar pocket and the German offensive. With the shuffling of Allied forces to meet the German offensive, Eisenhower was prepared to abandon the recently captured Strasbourg to a more stable defensive line. Devers and his French Allies balked at Eisenhower's orders. Devers put his career on the line and perhaps injured his chances of higher command in the postwar army by siding with the French. Fortunately, the line held, but it severely damaged his reputation in the eyes of Eisenhower and those he depended on, notably Omar Bradley. Unwilling to promote Devers, Marshall intervened. The defeat of the German offensive allowed for some much-needed rest and reorganization before the final campaign to defeat Nazi Germany in the spring of 1945. The final reduction of the Colmar pocket and the subsequent breakout into Germany and the ultimate victory allowed Eisenhower some rest and, at the very least, regain perspective on his most successful subordinates. As the war came to an end, Devers made Eis-

enhower's top ten list of successful combat commanders.

Wheeler spends the last couple chapters of his biography cataloging the end of Devers's service in the army and his post-army career. In the immediate postwar years, Devers returned to the Army Ground Force and spent a great deal of time working on distilling the lessons of the war and coming up with a model of organization that met the emerging challenges of the postwar era. With his years of experience with the troops and in staff positions, he fought hard to create a balanced and well-integrated army. There was a retreat from integration to something akin to creating fiefdoms of not only the combat arms but also the military in general. His own vision would be vindicated long after he retired. Unfortunately, his strong opinions got him into trouble during legislative battles that created an independent air force to the detriment of the other combat arms. Eisenhower, now chief of staff, reprimanded Devers for his indiscretions. In spite of their previous relationship during the war, in the contentious battles over the shape of American armed forces between the end of World War II and the Korean War, Eisenhower made a prudent decision. With the end of Devers's career in 1949, he would serve in various corporate and government positions, including the head of the American Battle Monument Commission. He led an active and fulfilling post-army career until his death in October 1979.

One narrative thread deserves some mention. Wheeler's biography adds to the richness of his narrative with some coverage of Devers's personal life, through the lens of his wife, Georgie Lyon Devers. These interludes in the narrative remind us that these men had personal lives outside of their professional spheres and, as in most biographies, provide a sense of humanity. The moving around, the worry, and the issues of an army family touched Devers's personal life just like his contemporaries and those who serve today.

Wheeler's biography is a needed corrective to the less-than-charitable observations concerning Devers's character, disposition, and fitness for command. While the book concentrates on his long career with the United States Army, He was not one of Eisenhower's favorites, and, at times, Wheeler seems to belittle Eisenhower's juvenile attitude toward Devers, implicitly describing these outbursts as tantrums. To Eisenhower's credit, as the pressures of running the European theater of operations evolved by the spring of 1945, he avoided any overt criticism and was able to recognize Devers's accomplishments in the Mediterranean and Europe. Is this a perfect biography? No. Wheeler does recognize the mistakes Devers made in his postwar career, but in the first half of the book, it reads as though Devers could do no wrong. It veers on hagiography and seems to indicate that his role in the future was preordained, an issue that crops up even in the best of biographies. Wheeler does, however, provide a nice balance between Devers's accomplishments and the larger historical context in which these decisions were made. Wheeler has crafted an excellent biography of a general whose accomplishments were pivotal in defeating the Wehrmacht. After years of relative obscurity in the historiography of World War II, Devers's time has arrived.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

Citation: Marc Blackburn. Review of Wheeler, James Scott. *Jacob L. Devers: A General's Life*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. December, 2016.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=47037>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No
Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.