



the General Ike Hated

When a top US commander had a chance to cross the Rhine River and charge into Germany, Dwight Eisenhower said no.

The reason? Ike loathed him.

by Edward G. Longacre

THE STORY OF THE REMAGEN BRIDGE IS A BELOVED EPISODE OF WWII HISTORY, at least for Americans. We all know the narrative, how units of Lieutenant General Omar Bradley's US Twelfth Army Group found the Ludendorff Bridge intact at Remagen, Germany, on March 7, 1945, and how they captured it and began crossing the Rhine River into Germany's heartland.

History, however, could have featured a very different and perhaps more spectacular story. On November 23, 1944—fully three and a half months before the Remagen crossing—another American force reached the banks of the Rhine 130 miles farther south and was ready to cross. The crossing, by lead elements of Lieutenant General Jacob L. Devers's Sixth Army Group, had every promise of success, because the German line on the opposite bank was weak and ill-prepared. The crossing seemed likely to roll up the German southern flank, which could have prevented the Battle of the Bulge, saved tens of thousands of American lives, and led swiftly to Allied victory in Europe.

But no such crossing was made. In fact, General Dwight "Ike" Eisenhower, the supreme Allied commander, absolutely forbade it. Why? His momentous decision rested not on cunning strategic calculations or secret knowledge about enemy resources, but on deep-seated resentment and one man's dislike for another.

Destined to Wear Stars

DEVERS (RHYMES WITH SEVERS), a 35-year army veteran, hailed from York, Pennsylvania, where he was born in 1887, the eldest of four children. His father owned a small business, and his mother's ancestors had immigrated to the United States in the early 1800s from Alsace, the very section of eastern France that Devers's forces would occupy in late 1944. Proficient in mathematics and science, Devers graduated with honors from York High School and was studying engineering at Lehigh University in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, when a local congressman appointed him to the US Military Academy.

Devers, known to his buddies as Jake, was ungainly and slightly built, but he excelled on West Point's basketball and baseball teams. Self-discipline acquired in early youth made him a model cadet. One description labeled him "an exceedingly earnest youth with rather Puritanical views." He didn't gamble, he rarely touched liquor or tobacco, and, in contrast to classmates such as George S. Patton Jr., he wasn't known for boisterousness or a salty vocabulary. The class of 1909's yearbook summed him up this way: "For purity, propriety and precision, Jacob is hard to beat."

Graduating 39th in a class of 103, Devers was posted to the field artillery, where he advocated for innovation and mechanization. He served at army posts from Wyoming to Hawaii and, at West Point, taught artillery tactics and coached basketball. But then his career took a turn that separated him from his peers: he failed to experience combat in World War I. By the time he was sent overseas, the war had ended.

Devers worried that missing out on WWI combat would short-circuit his career. Instead, three achievements in the decades after the war put him on the fast track to professional success. First, in 1925 he graduated from the US Army Command and General Staff School at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. Then, a few years later, he met and impressed Lieutenant Colonel George C. Marshall. Along with other talented young officers such as Eisenhower, Devers became a protégé of Marshall who, in September 1939, would become a full general and the army's chief of staff. Lastly, in 1933, Devers graduated from the US Army War College in Washington, DC.

Thanks largely to Marshall, Devers was promoted to brigadier general in 1940 over the heads of almost 500 officers senior to

The US Office of War Information released this action photo of Lieutenant General Jacob Devers when he was named commander of US Army forces in the European theater, after his predecessor died in a February 1943 plane crash. At age 55, Devers was one of America's top generals.

the General Ike Hated by Edward Longacre

him. That October, he was a major general as he took command of the newly formed 9th Infantry Division at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Less than a year later he was chief of the US Army Armored Force, headquartered at Fort Knox, Kentucky. He supervised the force's expansion from 4 to 16 divisions and drove the development of the M4 Sherman medium tank, which became the most-used Allied tank of World War II.

Devers had never commanded troops in combat, but he was widely regarded as a gifted organizer with a thorough knowledge of strategy, politics, and diplomacy. So as the United States entered a new world war, his career took off like a meteor. By September 1942 Devers was a lieutenant general. In May the next year Marshall gave him command of the army's European theater of operations, where he helped plan Operation Overlord, the invasion of Normandy, France. Devers was seriously considered for command of the Normandy invasion force, but when the job went to Eisenhower, Devers took Ike's place as commanding general in North Africa. He also became deputy supreme Allied commander in the Mediterranean.

Countrymen but Not Friends

DEVERS AND EISENHOWER had rubbed shoulders during their early careers, mainly at Fort Leavenworth, but were never close. Each respected the other's reputation, and Ike was also aware of Devers's influence with their mentor, Marshall. Now, as the two men interacted at high levels of command in World War II, whatever rapport they had deteriorated fast. Eisenhower held Devers's lack of combat experience against him and dismissed his leadership ability as ".22-caliber." Devers, meanwhile, regarded Ike as a plodder who adhered to outmoded notions of strategy, such as prioritizing the taking of territory rather than seeking out the enemy. At some point, Eisenhower seems to have gotten wind of this, which only sharpened his animus toward Devers.

Two events fed Eisenhower's antipathy toward his rival general. In the summer of 1943, Devers, then in command of the European theater, rejected a request to temporarily transfer four bomber groups from England to North Africa, where Ike was in command. Devers had made the decision after careful consideration, and Marshall supported him (further infuriating Eisenhower). Later, with Devers in Africa and Eisenhower commanding Operation Overlord, Ike wanted a large number of generals transferred from the Mediterranean for leadership in the coming Normandy invasion. Devers released many but held on to others for operations underway in Italy and coming soon in Southern France. Eisenhower bristled.

In the summer of 1944, Devers took charge of the new Sixth Army Group, a mixed command with US and French components. Despite his distaste for Devers, Eisenhower concurred with the assignment. In mid-August, Devers's group initiated Opera-

tion Dragoon, invading Southern France and opening a new Allied front. Charging inland from Riviera landing beaches, American and French units evicted the German occupiers, driving them northward. In early September, already 300 miles from the beaches, Devers's group linked with Patton's Third Army. With that, the Allied front stretched from the English Channel to the Mediterranean Sea.

At this point, Devers's army group came under Eisenhower's command. Henceforth it would have to conform to the plans and orders issued by Ike's Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Forces (SHAEF). But Devers retained his own logistical system via the Mediterranean, which granted him a certain degree of independence.

IN OCTOBER, elements of Major General Alexander Patch's Seventh Army—the US constituent of Devers's group—encountered German units that were under orders to defend to the death the narrow, treacherous passes through the High Vosges Mountains. Before November ended, Patch's army overwhelmed the fanatical defenders and broke through the Saverne Gap, which linked the northeastern province of Lorraine with the Alsace province farther east. At the same time, Devers's French troops were making significant gains of their own, liberating cities and towns along the southern edge of the Vosges and clearing the industrial area around the city of Belfort.

Any success Devers achieved, Ike chalked up to luck; clearly, the Sixth Army Group wasn't facing Germany's finest, as Bradley's group was. Nevertheless, Devers's men had covered much ground, and suddenly the road into Germany opened to them. By the third week of November, Major General Philippe Leclerc's French 2nd Armored Division, an element of the Seventh Army's XV Corps, was barreling across the Alsatian plain toward Strasbourg, Alsace's capital, on the Rhine River. On the 25th, Leclerc's tanks liberated the city, which had been under Nazi occupation since June 1940.

Sticking to the Plan

SOON, THE REST OF THE SIXTH ARMY GROUP reached the Rhine a little less than 40 miles north of Strasbourg, across from Rastatt, Germany. It appeared that Devers's command was about to become the first Allied force to enter the enemy's homeland, a prelude to the downfall and death of Adolf Hitler's Nazi Third Reich. Once that occurred, the name of Jacob Devers was sure to vie with those of his SHAEF colleagues for worldwide recognition.

But Eisenhower was running the show in eastern France in late 1944, and his priorities held sway. Above all, he was a staunch and consistent advocate of a broad-front offensive and a unified, coordinated drive toward Germany. He expected Devers to conform his progress to that of his associates to the north, reinforcing and supporting them rather than operating independently.



Eisenhower preferred to break the Siegfried Line—Germany’s western border defenses—on the *northern* Allied flank. He wanted Bradley’s Twelfth Army Group and British Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery’s 21st Army Group to cross the Rhine and ravage the Ruhr region, the Nazi war machine’s industrial base. Devers’s group would cross the Rhine at some point, too, but Ike provided no timetable and expected Devers to secure his approval before any launch.

By all indications, then, Eisenhower had relegated Devers’s command to a secondary role. Devers was keenly aware that his group lacked the newsworthiness of the forces serving farther north, which had landed in Normandy on D-Day. Thus he felt a quiet pride in reaching the German border ahead of Bradley, Patton, and Montgomery, whose names and faces appeared in newspapers around the globe. To the frustration of all—especially Eisenhower—rough terrain, muddy roads, and enemy resistance had bogged down the eastward drive of those more famous commanders. In contrast to their halting efforts, Devers’s forces had moved northeastward by consistent, sometimes extraordinary strides.

Devers didn’t have orders *not* to cross the Rhine. After all, getting across that river had always been the plan for the entire Western Allied line, and Eisenhower highlighted it in orders he issued in the summer of 1944. In late September, Devers outlined his overall vision of the Sixth Army Group’s objective in instructions he circulated to his subordinates: the group “...continues the offensive [after the Vosges Mountains campaign], destroys the enemy in its zone of action west of the Rhine, seizes bridgeheads across the Rhine and breaches the Siegfried Line.”

This plan that Devers described “was not a half-baked scheme hatched by field commanders on the fly,” points out David P. Colley, author of the 2008 book *Decision at Strasbourg: Ike’s Strategic Mistake to Halt the Sixth Army Group at the Rhine in 1944*. “On the contrary,” writes Colley, “it was a well-prepared and detailed proposal and a well-rehearsed plan of action produced over a period of nearly three months...and essentially in keeping with the broad scope of Allied military thinking” in Europe.

Opportunity’s Doorman

PATCH’S VI AND XV CORPS set to work preparing for a crossing toward Rastatt, above Strasbourg. It was an ambitious program. But considering the progress the Sixth Army Group had made thus far, Devers considered it fully achievable.

Devers’s initial plan called for the Seventh Army to begin crossing December 10–20, but by late November the date was moved up

to the first week of December. By then the XV Corps was to have established a bridgehead on the Rhine. The VI Corps would cross and move north, clearing any remaining Germans from the east bank. Patch’s Americans and their comrades in the French First Army of General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny had already caught the German 19th Army, which occupied sections of both banks, in a deadly vise. The Allies had systematically decimated six of the 19th Army’s eight infantry divisions; the other two were holding onto their tenuous positions with crippled fingers.

A brilliant component of Patch’s preparation for the Rhine assault had started all the way back in late September: the formation of river-crossing schools. Engineers set up sites on two rivers in east-central France whose conditions approximated those of the Rhine at Rastatt. There, crossing teams learned to deal with obstacles that included floating mines and aerial defenses.

As the crossing date approached, combat engineers labored to assemble enough DUKWs (amphibious trucks, pronounced “ducks”) and gasoline-powered transports (light and fast, 10-foot-long plywood storm boats and larger assault boats capable of carrying 20 men) to make the crossing as

quickly and smoothly as possible. At the same time, they addressed seemingly every contingency. Seventh Army engineering chief Brigadier General Garrison Davidson doubted that “any other army crossing plans included floating trip wires upstream of its bridges to detonate possible floating mines...or had dummy bridges to dilute the effect of any bombing attack.”

By November 18—a week before the final crossing date set by Devers—everything was in place, thanks to the strenuous efforts of Patch’s engineers, pontoniers, smoke-generators (who created smokescreens to cover troop movements), and other specialists.

Enter General Eisenhower. On November 24, Ike and Bradley visited VI and XV Corps headquarters as part of a two-day tour of the Allied southern front. Devers hadn’t kept SHAEF fully informed of his intentions, and Eisenhower, far from being pleasantly surprised, was alarmed to find crossing preparations so far advanced. Then, and later at Devers’s headquarters at Vittel, France, Ike made clear he wanted the crossing plan scrapped.

DEVERS COULDN’T BELIEVE HIS EARS. “Instead of exploiting a crossing of the Rhine and then proceeding north,” he wrote in his personal journal, Eisenhower “wanted me to throw my force directly to the north to the west of the Rhine and break through the Siegfried Line in conjunction with Patton. Both Patch and I were set to cross the Rhine and we had a clean breakthrough. By driving hard, I feel that we could have accom-



General Dwight Eisenhower and Devers had much in common. But Ike, the supreme Allied commander, disliked Devers, then leading the Sixth Army Group. Opposite: Visiting Devers’s group near Strasbourg, France, on November 25, 1944, Eisenhower frowns. The group was ready to cross the Rhine River into Germany. Ike said no, to the disbelief of Devers, his generals, and the enemy. Above: Devers in early 1944.

the General Ike Hated by Edward Longacre

plished our mission.... Eisenhower wanted to change Patton's front; said it was too wide a front; but evidently briefed by Patton, he wanted two divisions transferred to Patton's Army. This I protested vigorously...."

The conference at Vittel lasted into the early hours of the 25th. It was a heated affair. Angry exchanges dominated, including caustic remarks by Bradley, who considered Devers "not very smart, and much too inclined to rush off half-cocked." Ike was "mad as hell" and Devers equally irate.

Eisenhower ended up backing away from taking the two divisions away from Devers. But he adamantly refused to sanction the Rastatt crossing.

Baffled by a Bad Decision

DEVERS PUT THE BEST FACE ON A BAD SITUATION, writing in his journal that "we will carry on, using what we have to the maximum, and I am sure that with the fine spirit of team play demonstrated every day to me by the individuals on my staff and on the staffs of the two armies under my command..., we shall be a tough combination to lick."

Patton would have instead of playing it safe. Perhaps success would have eliminated any possibility of the Battle of the Bulge, 40,000 casualties there would have been avoided and the war shortened by a number of months...."

When Patton learned what had transpired at Vittel, he quipped that had he been in Devers's shoes, he would have crossed the river and told Ike about it afterward. Even the enemy seemed at a loss to understand Eisenhower's decision. Major General Friedrich von Mellenthin, chief of staff of German Army Group G, which directly opposed Devers's group, marveled that "the whole German defense of the Lower Rhine was collapsing but the Allied leaders would not allow their subordinates to exploit success."

AFTER THE WAR Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt, commander of Adolf Hitler's forces in the west, asked Patch why the Seventh Army hadn't crossed, when the Germans there "had nothing to defend with." Patch replied that he and Devers had fully intended to exploit the weakness, and explained how they had planned to do it. Hearing that, the German commander commented that "for a young fellow," the



Devers's men had raced across France after landing on the Riviera in August 1944. Forcing their way through fierce resistance in the Vosges Mountains' Saverne Gap (seen here), they pushed on to the Rhine. Ike said they had advanced so swiftly because they faced weak enemy forces.

Despite the good-soldier rhetoric, Devers's resentment was apparent to all who attended the Vittel conference or were privy to its details. Major General Daniel Noce, who oversaw combat engineering for the Sixth Army Group, wrote that the meeting left Devers wondering aloud if he was "a member of the same team" as Eisenhower.

Devers wasn't the only one shocked and disappointed by Ike's decision. Virtually everyone involved in planning the crossing believed the supreme commander was throwing away a gleaming opportunity to roll up the German line across the river from south to north. Patch insisted that his troops, once across the Rhine, would have swarmed into southern Germany and uprooted the enemy's entire front. General Davidson later spoke for many in the Seventh Army when he estimated what might have happened if "Ike had the audacity to take a calculated risk, as General

55-year-old Patch was quite astute.

Among historians, the consensus has been that Ike blocked the Sixth Army Group crossing for two reasons. First, Devers's bold, proactive strategy clashed with his own preoccupation with shared, measured progress toward the German border. Second, Ike disliked Devers. In the two-volume 1981 study *Eisenhower's Lieutenants: The Campaigns of France and Germany, 1944-1945*, historian Russell F. Weigley notes Eisenhower's "increasingly evident penchant for nagging at Devers and finding fault with almost every move he made. Ike's unwonted coolness toward the 6th Army Group commander went beyond the usual and immediate explanation that Devers, unlike Bradley and Patton, was not an old friend...." Ike's feelings toward Devers, which Weigley contends had a "touch of irrationality," exerted a pernicious long-term effect on Allied operations in France and Germany.



At Strasbourg on November 25, Devers and Ike are grim (right) as General Antoine Béthouart (center) traces his First French Corps's drive across France. General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny, French First Army, and Lieutenant General Omar Bradley, US Twelfth Army Group, look on (left).

Eisenhower biographer Carlo D'Este (author of the 2002 book *Eisenhower: A Soldier's Life*) comments, "When it came to Jake Devers, Eisenhower seemed particularly thin-skinned." Frequent run-ins with other subordinates, chiefly Montgomery, "may have made Eisenhower even less forgiving of Devers's independent attitudes," D'Este theorizes.

Soldiering On

THERE WOULD BE NO GLORY for the Sixth Army Group in the war's final months. Bowing to Ike's demands, Devers detached elements of the Seventh Army to help de Lattre drive off the last German forces west of the Rhine. Then he led Patch's main body on an arduous northeastward march that brought it into close contact with Patton. In mid-December, when Patton's Third Army turned north to oppose the German counteroffensive in the Ardennes—the Battle of the Bulge—Devers extended his lines almost to the breaking point to cover the shift. Beginning on New Year's Day 1945, Patch's forces met and repulsed Operation Nordwind, the final German offensive of the war.

Devers and Patch fought their way back to the Siegfried Line in February. On March 26, 1945, almost three weeks after Bradley crossed at Remagen and six weeks before Germany's surrender, Eisenhower finally permitted the Seventh Army to bridge the Rhine. Despite prevailing in some of the bitterest fighting of the war, including street-by-street combat in the German city of Heilbronn that April, Patch's command finished the war as what historian and WWII veteran Charles Whiting called "America's Forgotten Army."

Devers had become a full general on March 8, despite Ike's disagreement with the promotion. The fourth star made Devers junior only to Eisenhower among US commanders in Europe, and therefore senior to Bradley and Patton. In June, Devers was appointed chief of US Army Ground Forces, the army's training command. The Stateside assignment appeared worthy of an officer of Devers's rank but, as David Colley points out, it "wrapped him in relative obscurity." Devers remained on active duty until September 1949, when he reached the mandatory retirement age of 62.

IN CIVILIAN LIFE Devers and his wife, Georgie, tried their hands at ranching in West Virginia. Later he accepted a number of business positions, most notably as technical assistant to the president of Fairchild Aircraft. He died in October 1979 and was buried in Arlington National Cemetery.

Devers's postwar relations with Ike had remained strained until 1954, when Eisenhower, then president, named him to a series of prestigious posts, including chairman of the American Battle Monuments Commission. Unfortunately, the rapprochement came a decade too late. It failed to erase the memory of a rancorous personal relationship, one that scuttled an opportunity to shorten the war in Europe and save the lives of countless men. ★

EDWARD G. LONGACRE, a retired US Air Force historian and author of numerous books, has written frequently for America in WWII about the Sixth Army Group's 100th Infantry Division, in which his father served.