



# EARLE GILMORE WHEELER

3 July 1964 — 2 July 1970

**E**arle Wheeler was born in Washington, DC, on 13 January 1908. After attending Eastern High School, he joined the DC National Guard at the age of sixteen and rose to the rank of sergeant. He then entered the US Military Academy in 1928. After graduating in 1932, Wheeler spent the next twelve years as an infantry officer, serving from company to division level. He also taught mathematics at West Point and graduated from the Command and General Staff College. In 1942 he commanded an infantry battalion.

During World War II Wheeler rose to colonel. As Chief of Staff of the 63d Infantry Division, he went overseas with the division in December 1944. Wheeler participated in campaigns that halted the German drive in Alsace-Lorraine, breached the Siegfried Line, seized Heidelberg, and crossed the Danube. He was selected to lead an assault regiment against Hitler's mountain fortress in the Bavarian Alps but missed his opportunity for combat command when Germany surrendered as the operation was about to begin.

After the war, Wheeler served in a variety of command and staff assignments. He commanded the 351st Infantry Regiment in Italy in 1951 and 1952. He was then assigned to Allied Forces Southern Europe in Naples, Italy, first as Readiness Officer and then as Assistant Chief of Staff for Plans and Operations. On his return to the United States in 1955, Wheeler joined the Army Staff as Director of Plans in the Office of the Operations Deputy. He was promoted to major general in December 1955 and in 1957 became Assistant Deputy Chief of Staff for Military Operations. While serving in that position, he was chosen to head a joint committee to study ways to make interservice planning and decision making more effective.

**General Earle G. Wheeler**  
United States Army



Colonel Wheeler inspects an honor guard in Trieste, November 1951.

From 1958 until 1960 Wheeler commanded the 2d Armored Division and III Corps in Texas. Promoted to lieutenant general, Wheeler returned to the Pentagon in 1960 as Director of the Joint Staff. In March 1962 the Army promoted him to general and he was assigned as Deputy Commander in Chief of the European Command.

After only seven months Wheeler returned to Washington in October 1962 as Chief of Staff of the Army. In addition to developing the Army's air assault division and improving the overseas reinforcement system, he helped persuade the other Service

Chiefs to support the Limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty with the Soviet Union. During Wheeler's twenty-one months in office, Army troops were deployed for possible use during both the Cuban missile crisis and civil rights disturbances in Mississippi and Alabama. Following a visit to South Vietnam in late 1962, Wheeler argued for augmenting US support troops and advisers to help the Saigon government deal more effectively with the Viet Cong insurgency.

General Wheeler became Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff on 3 July 1964. During the next four years he was a regular attendee

at President Lyndon Johnson's Tuesday luncheons of senior policy advisers and at other high-level national security conferences. Wheeler's influence, however, was overshadowed by that of Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara. As Chairman, General Wheeler worked with marked success to eliminate dissents or "splits" in JCS recommendations, which, he believed, only invited interference by McNamara. But Wheeler's approach did not succeed. Unanimity did not translate into greater JCS influence, and McNamara determined military policies to a degree that none of his predecessors had approached.

The Vietnam War consumed much of Wheeler's time and energy during the six years he served as Chairman. Initially, Wheeler and the Chiefs believed that US air power—without ground troops or the risk of a land war with China—could assist South Vietnam in defeating communist aggression. Throughout late 1964 and early 1965, Wheeler presented the President and his civilian advisers JCS recommendations for retaliatory air strikes and then for a sustained air campaign against North Vietnam. In February 1965 President Johnson approved a bombing campaign, though not on the scale recommended by the Chiefs. By the time the air operations got under way the following month, the situation in South Vietnam had worsened. Wheeler and his JCS colleagues no longer thought an air campaign alone would suffice and recommended the commitment of ground forces. Although Johnson approved ground force deployments, they were not of the magnitude preferred by the Chiefs.

From 1965 through early 1968, Wheeler led the Chiefs in recommending an expanded air campaign against North Vietnam and increased deployment of ground troops to South Vietnam. Johnson listened carefully to Wheeler and approved gradually expanded bombing and larger force deployments, but

always at slower and smaller rates than those advocated by the Chiefs. Such "gradualism," Wheeler and his colleagues argued, failed to punish the enemy sufficiently to force him to end the war in Vietnam.

The Tet offensive of January 1968 marked a turning point in Wheeler's and the Joint Chiefs' influence on the conduct of the war. Although the offensive was costly for the enemy, it proved a psychological victory. The magnitude of the surprise attack greatly increased opposition to the war in the United States. As a consequence, President Johnson increasingly disregarded JCS advice and proceeded to limit the bombing of North Vietnam, place a hold on further troop increases in South Vietnam, and call for negotiations to end the fighting. Wheeler continued to attend all high-level White House meetings on Vietnam, but his recommendations and advice on the war had little impact. In July 1968, however, Johnson sought and received congressional approval to extend Wheeler's chairmanship for an additional year.

Though preoccupied with the war, President Johnson planned to begin negotiations with the Soviet Union for strategic arms limitations. In July 1968 Wheeler established the position of Assistant to the Chairman for Strategic Arms Negotiations. Toward the end of General Wheeler's tenure as Chairman, President Richard Nixon's Secretary of Defense, Melvin Laird, authorized a support staff for the position, and this office became the focal point for military support to the US delegation to the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT).

In 1969 President Nixon secured another year's extension of Wheeler's tenure as Chairman. Determined to end US involvement in the war, Nixon adopted a policy of Vietnamization, the gradual withdrawal of US forces and buildup of South Vietnamese combat capabilities, while also negotiating with



General Wheeler and General Creighton W. Abrams in South Vietnam, October 1969.

the North Vietnamese. Political necessity compelled larger and faster US withdrawals than Wheeler and his colleagues thought prudent.

General Wheeler retired on 2 July 1970 after an unprecedented six years in office. Those who knew him best detected his great

frustration over his failure to win civilian approval of the strategy that he believed would win the war in Vietnam. The stress of these six years led to several heart attacks that greatly weakened Wheeler's health. He died on 18 December 1975 in Frederick, Maryland.



General Wheeler and his family with President Richard M. Nixon following a ceremony at the White House, where Wheeler received the Defense Distinguished Service Medal, 9 July 1970.

# Earle Gilmore Wheeler

General, USA

## Promotions

	Dates	
	Temporary	Permanent
2LT . . . . .		10 Jun 32
1LT . . . . .		01 Aug 35
CPT. . . . .	09 Sep 40 . . . . .	10 Jun 42
MAJ . . . . .	01 Feb 42	
LTC. . . . .	11 Nov 42	
COL . . . . .	26 Jun 43	
LTC (postwar reduction) . . . . .	01 Jul 47. . . . .	01 Jul 48
COL . . . . .	07 Sep 50 . . . . .	06 Oct 53
BG . . . . .	08 Nov 52. . . . .	13 May 60
MG . . . . .	21 Dec 55 . . . . .	30 Jun 61
LTG. . . . .	21 Apr 60	
GEN . . . . .	01 Mar 62	

## Assignments

	Dates	
	From	To
29th Infantry, Fort Benning, GA . . . . .	1932 . . . . .	1936
Infantry School, Fort Benning, GA . . . . .	1936 . . . . .	1937
15th Infantry Regiment, Tientsin, China, and Fort Lewis, WA . . . . .	1937 . . . . .	1940
Instructor, US Military Academy, West Point, NY . . . . .	1940 . . . . .	1941
Aide-de-Camp to Commanding General, 36th Infantry Division, Fort Sam Houston and Camp Bowie, TX . . . . .	1941 . . . . .	1941
Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, KS . . . . .	1941 . . . . .	1942
Battalion Commander, 141st Infantry Regiment, Camp Blanding, FL . . . . .	1942 . . . . .	1942
G-3, 99th Infantry Division; Chief of Staff, 63rd Infantry Division, Camp Van Dorn, MS . . . . .	1942 . . . . .	1944
Chief of Staff, 63d Infantry Division, European Theater of Operations . . . . .	1944 . . . . .	1945
Instructor, Field Artillery School, Fort Sill, OK . . . . .	1945 . . . . .	1946
Deputy Chief of Staff, Headquarters, Western Base Section, France . . . . .	1946 . . . . .	1947

<b>Assignments</b>	<b>Dates</b>	
	From	To
G-3, Headquarters, US Constabulary, Heidelberg, Germany . . . . .	1947 . . . . .	1949
Student, National War College, Fort McNair, Washington, DC . . . . .	1949 . . . . .	1950
Member, Joint Intelligence Group, Joint Chiefs of Staff, Washington, DC . . . . .	1950 . . . . .	1951
Commanding Officer, 351st Infantry Regiment, Trieste; then Deputy Commanding General, US Troops, Trieste . . . . .	1951 . . . . .	1952
Readiness Officer, then Assistant Chief of Staff for Plans and Operations, Allied Forces, Southern Europe (NATO), Naples, Italy. . . . .	1952 . . . . .	1955
Director of Plans, Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Military Operations, US Army, Washington, DC . . . . .	1955 . . . . .	1957
Assistant Deputy Chief of Staff for Military Operations, Washington, DC . . . . .	1957 . . . . .	1958
Commanding General, 2d Armored Division, Fort Hood, TX . . . . .	1958 . . . . .	1959
Commanding General, III Corps and 2d Armored Division, Fort Hood, TX. . . . .	1959 . . . . .	1960
Director, Joint Staff, Washington, DC . . . . .	1960 . . . . .	1962
Deputy Commander in Chief, US European Command, Camp des Loges, France. . . . .	1962 . . . . .	1962
Chief of Staff, US Army, Washington, DC . . . . .	1962 . . . . .	1964
Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, Washington, DC. . . . .	1964 . . . . .	1970

### **Principal US Military Decorations**

- Defense Distinguished Service Medal
- Army Distinguished Service Medal (with 2 oak leaf clusters)
- Navy Distinguished Service Medal
- Air Force Distinguished Service Medal
- Legion of Merit
- Bronze Star (with oak leaf cluster)
- Army Commendation Medal (with oak leaf cluster)