

Hap Arnold is the Air Force's only five-star general, but just the 10th highest ranked US military officer ever.



The Highest Ranking

By Peter Grier

Gen. of the Air Force Henry H. “Hap” Arnold is the highest-ranking officer in US Air Force history. But he didn’t don a USAF uniform until late in life, well after retirement.

How can both those statements be true?

The answer sheds light on the United States’ fascinating list of all-time top military leaders—those who reached the highest rungs, how they got there, and how they stand compared to compatriots and heroes who came before.

As every airman is taught today, Arnold was a giant, a pioneer of American airpower. Among the first US military pilots taught by the Wright brothers, he helped organize the young

American air arm in World War I. In World War II, he built and led the nation’s armada of 80,000 warplanes to victory, despite his own debilitating heart trouble.

His accomplishments were recognized in 1944 when he was elevated to five-star status. At the time, US air units were part of the Army, so his official title was General of the Army. That was the rank he held when he retired due to poor health in 1946.

One year later the United States Air Force was born. Two years later, in 1949, President Truman signed a bill commissioning the retired Arnold a five-star General of the Air Force, an honor many in Washington felt Hap richly deserved. Truman’s desk

calendar notes he personally presented Arnold with his new commission during a brief noontime meeting on June 2, 1949.

Arnold died in Sonoma, Calif., on Jan. 15, 1950. Following a somber ceremony held amidst sleet and winter weather, the career-long Army man was buried in Arlington Cemetery as a full member of the new Air Force he had done so much to bring to life.

Today Arnold remains the only officer in American history to reach five-star status in two services. But this does not make him the highest-ranking officer in the US military pantheon, of course. He was not the top US general of World War II. He was not even the highest-ranking officer promoted to



star rank did not seem commensurate with what he had accomplished. After all, Washington did more than defeat the British in battle. Along the way he established the framework for how American soldiers should organize themselves, how they should behave, and how they should relate to civilian leaders. Almost every big decision he made set a precedent. He was the father of the US military as well as the US itself.

“Washington’s stewardship as the Army’s senior officer was unique and, by its nature, could not have been duplicated by his successors,” writes Army historian William Gardner Bell in *Army Generals and Chiefs of Staff, 1775-2005*.

Fitting and Proper

Furthermore, the needs of wars on a huge scale in the 20th century had produced four- and five-star US generals. Technically, they outranked the three-star Washington. By the time the nation’s bicentennial rolled around, federal lawmakers decided it was only fair to recognize the great Virginian’s preeminence. Accordingly, on Sept. 28, 1976, Congress passed a joint resolution calling for Washington to be posthumously promoted to the grade of General of the Armies of the United States, with that grade to have precedence over other Army grades,

Left: General George Washington’s attack on the Hessians at Trenton, Dec. 25, 1776, as depicted by artist Emanuel Leutze.

five-star status in December 1944, when Congress approved the grade.

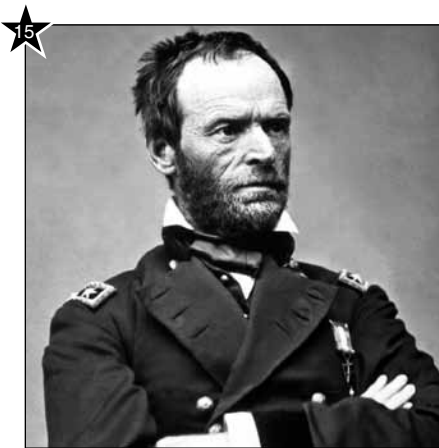
What does the all-time US military hierarchy look like? Who heads the list, and how did they get there?

Perhaps the best way to answer these questions is to start at the pinnacle of leadership, where the situation is clear. George Washington is the highest-ranking US officer. If somehow the nation’s wartime heroes were gathered together in one force, from Ulysses S. Grant to Gen. David H. Petraeus, they would all be under the command of the father of our country.

This is so because Congress and the President directed it. When Washington died, he was a lieutenant general. But as the centuries passed, this three-

Highest Ranked Military Officers

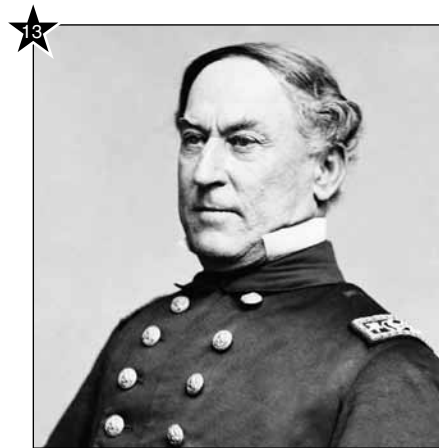
- ★ Gen. of the Armies George Washington
- ★² Gen. of the Armies John J. Pershing
- ★³ Adm. of the Navy George Dewey
- ★⁴ Fleet Adm. William D. Leahy
- ★⁵ Gen. of the Army George C. Marshall
- ★⁶ Fleet Adm. Ernest J. King
- ★⁷ Gen. of the Army Douglas MacArthur
- ★⁸ Fleet Adm. Chester W. Nimitz
- ★⁹ Gen. of the Army Dwight D. Eisenhower
- ★¹⁰ Gen. of the Air Force Henry H. “Hap” Arnold
- ★¹¹ Fleet Adm. William F. “Bull” Halsey Jr.
- ★¹² Gen. of the Army Omar N. Bradley
- ★¹³ Fleet Adm. David G. Farragut
- ★¹⁴ Gen. of the Army Ulysses S. Grant
- ★¹⁵ Gen. of the Army William T. Sherman



William Sherman



Ulysses Grant



David Farragut

past or present. It is clear from the resolution’s wording that lawmakers meant Washington to be the senior US military officer of all time. “It is considered fitting and proper that no officer of the United States Army should outrank Lt. Gen. George Washington on the Army list,” stated the legislation.

President Gerald Ford was happy to sign an Executive Order that carried out Congress’ wishes. Washington’s appointment was given an effective date of July 4, 1976.

The grade of General of the Armies, as opposed to that of General of the Army, is meant to convey leadership over all branches of the US military. It has been associated with only two men in US history: George Washington and John J. Pershing.

Of the two, only Pershing held the title in his lifetime. Thus “Black Jack” might be listed second in the hierarchy of US military leaders. Congress first voted to create the General of the Armies rank in 1799, but the aging George Washington was not immediately raised to this new level and he died that year. In 1800, with Washington gone and the prospect of a

war with France dissipating, Congress specifically authorized President John Adams to suspend promotions to this exalted plane.

Enter Pershing. Born in 1860, he was an officer of the old school. A star at West Point, he served in the Indian Wars, the Spanish-American War, and the US struggle against insurrection in the Philippines. He performed admirably as an observer in the Russo-Japanese War—service that helped convince President Theodore Roosevelt to personally nominate him for brigadier general over 909 higher-ranking officers.

What Insignia?

Despite personal tragedy—his wife and three daughters died in a fire at the Presidio of San Francisco in 1915—Pershing rose to command the American Expeditionary Forces in World War I, the first large-scale deployment of US troops in Europe. Starting from almost nothing he organized training and logistics for an army of two million men. He insisted Americans would fight as a separate force—a move that helped establish the US as a world power and increased

President Woodrow Wilson’s leverage in the postwar Paris peace conference.

On Sept. 3, 1919, Congress honored Pershing’s wartime service by reviving the grade of General of the Armies and bestowing it upon him. He retired with that rank on Sept. 13, 1924.

After this promotion, Pershing continued to wear the four stars he and the Army’s other top generals of the time had adopted as their insignia, according to the Army Center of Military History. At the time, service regulations held that full generals should wear four stars, but made no mention of the insignia a General of the Armies should display.

Later, at the height of World War II, in December 1944, Army regulations were changed to prescribe that officers holding the rank of General of the Army (singular) should wear five stars on their shoulder. This did not affect Pershing’s place in the service or in history.

“Although General Pershing continued to wear only four [stars], he remained preeminent among all Army personnel, by virtue of congressional action and Army regulations governing



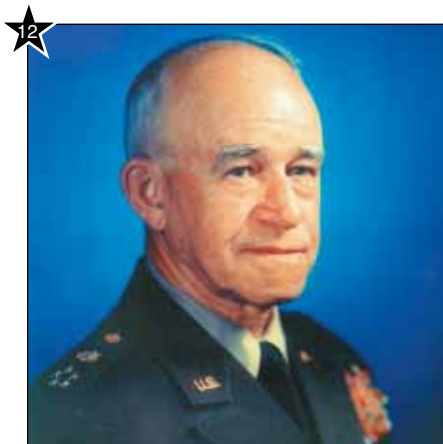
Dwight Eisenhower



Chester Nimitz



Douglas MacArthur



Omar Bradley



William "Bull" Halsey Jr.



Henry "Hap" Arnold

rank and precedence, until his death on July 15, 1948," states an Army Center of Military History monograph on five-star leaders.

The next step down on the US military ladder is Admiral of the Navy, a rank that by seniority and precedence is superior to that of a five-star Fleet Admiral. Only one man has held it in American history—George Dewey. He is thus arguably the third-ranking US officer of all time.

Dewey, like Washington and Pershing, acceded to his high place in the military firmament after his toughest battles were won. A Vermonter and Naval Academy graduate, he served as an up-and-coming officer in the Civil War. By 1898 he was a commodore and commander of the US Asiatic Squadron. At the onset of the Spanish-American War, he was ordered to proceed from China to the Philippines to commence actions against the Spanish fleet. On the morning of May 1, 1898, he reached the entrance to Manila Bay, then sent his ships into battle shortly after first light, uttering to the commander of his flagship USS *Olympia*, Capt. Charles V. Gridley, the

famous line, "You may fire when you are ready, Gridley."

The Battle of Manila Bay ended in a great US victory, with Spain's ships and shore installations destroyed and minimal loss to US forces. It put the world on notice a new sea power was rising and, not coincidentally, made Dewey a national hero. Congress quickly voted him the thanks of the US and bumped him up to rear admiral. Then, in 1899, lawmakers voted to create the rank of Admiral of the Navy, to be held by only one person. "Whenever such office shall be vacated by death or otherwise the office shall cease to exist," said the enacting legislation.

Arch-General

Another congressional act raised Dewey to this pedestal on March 24, 1903, with his commissioning date set retroactively to March 2, 1899. According to a Naval History and Heritage Command biography, he held the rank of Admiral of the Navy until his death in Washington, D.C., on Jan. 16, 1917.

The US military and lawmakers have traditionally awarded five stars only to

admirals and generals who are top-shelf leaders in great wars. Following Washington, Pershing, and Dewey, whose final ranks were essentially accolades, the next level in the hierarchy consists of famous officers who steered the nation to victory in World War II.

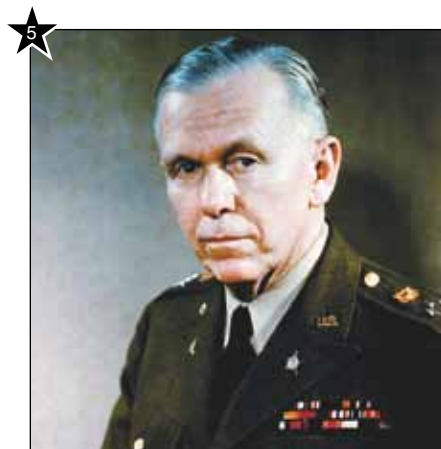
George C. Marshall was preeminent among these men (though not the most senior). A graduate of Virginia Military Institute, Marshall was a second lieutenant in World War I's AEF and an aide to Pershing. He helped devise the crucial and victorious Meuse-Argonne Offensive. He rose through the ranks in the interwar period, a time when promotions were hard to come by for most.

A brigadier in 1936, he was named Army Chief of Staff by President Franklin Roosevelt in 1939. Marshall was sworn in to the post and raised to general on Sept. 1, the day German forces marched into Poland and World War II began.

After Pearl Harbor, Marshall became nothing less than the principal architect of the American contribution to the Allied cause and eventual victory. Like his mentor Pershing, he demanded competence to the extent that some



Ernest King



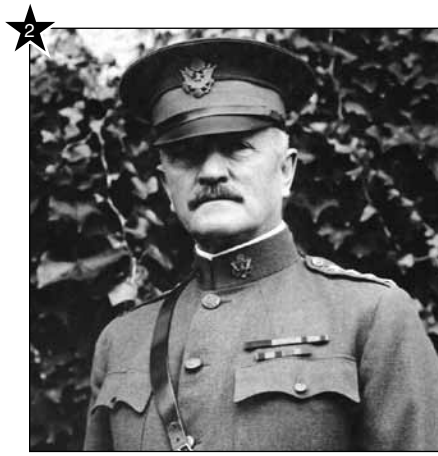
George Marshall



William Leahy



George Dewey



John Pershing



George Washington

found him cold. He once appointed an old colleague to a high post, only to hear the man had delayed acceptance because his furniture was not packed for the necessary move. Marshall called him to see if this was true and was told it was—the man’s wife was out of town; there was nothing to be done. Marshall withdrew the job and placed his friend on the “retired” list the next day.

The Army Chief himself was satisfied with the four stars on his shoulder. But from the beginning of the war the Navy pushed Congress for a higher-ranking slot, with some in that service arguing that they needed such a level to place them on better footing with allies, particularly the British, who had fleet admirals and field marshals of such status.

In 1942, Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Ernest J. King wrote Marshall a memo urging that Marshall accede to the creation of a level above admiral and general. King’s suggestions for the names of these new ranks were “arch-admiral” and “arch-general.” In a Nov. 30, 1942, memo, Marshall replied that he did not think the move wise.

“In the first place, it would involve the immediate implication that we were proposing something for our own personal advancement. Also, I believe that neither our legislators nor the American people would react at all favorably to the creation of what to them would be exalted military rank,” Marshall wrote his Navy counterpart.

Pressure from President Roosevelt, a former assistant secretary of the Navy, and Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson eventually forced Marshall to accept the inflation of ranks. Marshall and his fellow Army four-stars got an additional star and title General of the Army. The Navy received the five-star rank Fleet Admiral.

Under the promotion deal, FDR’s Chief of Staff Adm. William D. Leahy, who served as the de-facto first US Joint Chiefs Chairman, emerged as the most senior officer. Leahy was promoted to Fleet Admiral effective Dec. 15, 1944—and thus today ranks fourth on the all-time US military list. Marshall was next, with a promotion date of Dec. 16. He was followed by King, promotion date Dec. 17; Gen. Douglas MacArthur, Dec. 18; Adm. Chester W. Nimitz, Dec. 19; Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, Dec. 20; and lastly Arnold, who received the first of his eventual two five-star posts on Dec. 21, 1944.

Marshal Marshall

The story around Washington in later years was that Marshall had opposed the move to five stars because he did not want to be referred to as “Marshal Marshall.” He denied this in postwar interviews with his eventual biographer, Forrest C. Pogue. “I didn’t think I needed that rank and I didn’t want to be beholden to Congress for any rank or anything of that kind,” Marshall told Pogue. “That was twisted around and somebody said I didn’t like the term marshal because it was the same as my name. I know Mr. Churchill twitted me about this in a rather scathing tone. I don’t recall that I ever made the expression. But my reason for not wanting it was, I thought it was much better that I personally shouldn’t be beholden to anything for Congress except for fair treatment—which they gave me.”

In December 1945, Adm. William F. Halsey Jr. earned elevation to the status of Fleet Admiral. In 1950, during the Korean War, Army Gen. Omar N. Bradley

received a fifth star. Since that time four stars has remained the highest level of US military achievement. After Korea there was some sentiment in Congress to establish a six-star rank for MacArthur, but that faded as surely as MacArthur’s own political ambitions. Similarly, after the 1991 Persian Gulf War, there was some discussion of promoting Army Generals H. Norman Schwarzkopf and Colin L. Powell to five-star rank, but this sentiment soon faded.

As to the great US military leaders of the Civil War, today they rank below the five stars, but at the top of the four-star hierarchy. First among these is Adm. David G. Farragut, the Navy hero credited with saying, “Damn the torpedos, full speed ahead!” as he entered Mobile Bay in 1864. A grateful Congress promoted Farragut to full admiral after the war, on July 25, 1866. He was the first Navy officer to hold that rank. Farragut outranked his Army compatriots due to length of service; he was appointed a midshipman in 1810—when he was nine years old.

On July 25, 1866, Congress also made Lt. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant a full General of the Army, putting him in charge of all Army forces. He was succeeded in this post by Lt. Gen. William T. Sherman, promoted to General of the Army on March 4, 1869. According to the Army Center of Military History, regulations at the time specified that an officer so designated wear a four-star insignia.

With the beginning of the Civil War’s sesquicentennial last year, the relative ranks of Farragut, Grant, and Sherman are once again likely to generate discussion. ■

Peter Grier, a Washington, D.C., editor for the Christian Science Monitor, is a longtime defense correspondent and a contributor to Air Force Magazine. His most recent article, “Big Plans for the Air Force Museum,” appeared in February.