General Larry D. Welch

Clan Solomon

Last Cold War Chief of Staff of the Air Force

by Lori Hahn



Larry Deane Welch was born in a little town called Morningstar in Oklahoma smack in the middle of the Great Depression in 1934. Three kids had come before him, and one would follow. His parents, Oliver and Nina (Stewart) Welch, spent most of their lives in Kansas but during the Depression moved wherever there was work both north and south of the panhandle. Larry ended up attending a number of schools, but at least he was getting an education. The two country high schools he attended in no way prepared him for college. But athletics helped him fit whenever he moved.

Between junior and senior year, a recruiter for the local national guard battery came through the high school, and Larry signed up. It was an honor to be part of the Guard in town. His skill at calculus allowed him the job of fire control. After graduation, he couldn't decide on what he would do in college but thought he'd try a degree in Texas. He transferred his Guard membership to Texas. In the meantime, his draft number was closing in on him. He took a test to enlist and though the Army was offering two years, the Air Force was offering three, and Larry hedged his bets and went Air Force. There he would spend the next 38 years, rising to the pinnacle position before he retired.

After basic training at Lackland Air Force Base (AFB), Texas, he was on casual duty, waiting for his advanced training. His main chore was helping training staff get their recruits from one place to the next. One day, he was tasked with taking the recruits to the base theatre to be briefed on the Aviation Cadet Program. On the way out, he filled out an interest slip and dropped it in the box.

Next thing he knew, he was selected for officer pilot training. He had the same three-year commitment, so it was a win-win. The program was sort of like Officer Candidate School. After the 13 weeks at Lackland for military training, Larry was sent for his six months of flight training. He completed that near the top and was picked for one of three fighter slots. That's where Larry really wanted to be. Then, the training command decided that the top eight pilots would stay and train future pilots.

Among some of these pilots were majors and lt. colonels. The two-star general for the base called Larry in one day and that he couldn't have lieutenants running around telling senior officers their business. He pinned on Larry's captain bars. This promotion was called a "below-the-zone" promotion, which meant it was ahead of schedule. He was thrilled and went home and walked around the house not saying a word about the giant captain bars sitting on his shoulders. His wife carried on her conversation about going downtown, which was to be their destination, totally unaware, until Larry became frustrated and said he couldn't go until she noticed something. She finally noticed!

As any career military member knows, the spouse is what keeps it all together. He married the former Eunice Ellis about a year after he finished flight school in 1956. They were married for 66 years prior to her death in 2022.

Larry was then operations officer of the 366th Tactical Fighter Wing He would be promoted to Major below-the-zone as well. There was one slot and four candidates. He was told that he was selected because he went to night classes working towards his undergrad degree. He completed it with 170 credits. Then he spent a tour flying F4C Phantoms in Vietnam. He was back to school upon his return, going to Air War College to get his master's.

Like all career officers, he then spent some time in a headquarters environment. He ascribes much of his success to date with luck, but it was not luck that got one of his analysis papers in front of a bevy of generals and altered military policy. His skill analyzing a problem and writing it up to have the greatest impact was now revealed.

By 1974, he was a Colonel and Vice Commander of the 35th Tactical Fighter Wing at George AFB. From there, movement was swift. He went on to other analysis positions at the Pentagon. He built battle plans for Iraq and analyzed optimal weapons planning. He received a first and



Colin Powell and his Joint Chiefs of Staff. Larry is directly behind Powell in blue.



then a second and then a third star. He served as Tactical Air Command as Director of Operations and got his fourth star serving as Commander of Strategic Air Command.

In 1986 he was promoted to Chief of Staff of the Air Force. This had a required four-year term. The end of that term would come in 1990, the end of the Cold War. The Soviet-Bloc countries got their independence, and the Soviet Union collapsed.

His charge was challenging. He had to implement the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense (DoD) Reorganization Act, which basically upended the way the DoD did business. He and the chiefs managed to get the DoD through the process successfully.

Where do you go after you've reached the top? You retire. Not Welch, though. After leaving the service, he chaired the advisory committee to the Homeland Security Agency's Science and Technology Division. He then spent some time on the Rumsfeld Commission, which reported to Congress on the ballistic missile threat. In 2009, he retired as president of Institute for Defense Analyses. In 2014, he was asked to work on the Independent Review of the Department of Defense Nuclear Enterprise.

He is truly retired now and living in Virginia. His three children includes one son who attended the Air Force Academy and was a career officer, retiring as a colonel in 2024. Here is Gen Welch's lineage:

Thomas Munson > Samuel Munson > **Solomon Munson** > Samuel Munson > Ruth Munson > Mary Van Cleef > Ruth Ryker > Polley Hillis > John S Welch > Arthur Welch > Oliver Welch > **Larry D Welch**

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