

GEORGE KENNEY'S FIG



When the US Army needed a new commander for air forces in the Southwest Pacific in July 1942, Maj. Gen. George C. Kenney was not the first choice.

The Army's first selection was Lt. Gen. Frank Andrews, but Andrews had previous knowledge of Gen. Douglas MacArthur, commander of Allied forces in that part of the world, and detested him. He managed to evade the assignment.

The Army's second choice was Brig. Gen. Jimmy Doolittle, hero of the air raid on Tokyo, but MacArthur said he was

too flamboyant. That was rich coming from MacArthur, who was famous far and wide for his egocentric style.

Thus it came down to Kenney to replace competent, easygoing Lt. Gen. George H. Brett, who had clashed with MacArthur and his heavy-handed chief of staff, Maj. Gen. Richard K. Sutherland.

Lt. Gen. Henry H. "Hap" Arnold, commander of the Army Air Forces, said, "My God, if MacArthur can't get along with Brett, how do you think he can get along with Kenney?"—an airman

who had a reputation in the Air Corps for being outspoken and pugnacious.

When Kenney got to MacArthur's headquarters in Australia, he confronted Sutherland first. Drawing a dot on

Kenney had numerous strengths but the critical one was that he got along with Douglas MacArthur.

a piece of paper, he said, "This dot represents what you know about air operations, the entire rest of the paper

FIGHTING SPIRIT

By John T. Correll

George Kenney (r) delivered results in the South Pacific, and the acerbic Kenney and the temperamental Douglas MacArthur (l) formed a mutual admiration society.

National Archives photo

said he was. The two soon formed a mutual admiration society.

After the war, MacArthur said, "Of all the commanders of our major air forces engaged in World War II, none surpassed General Kenney in those three great essentials of successful combat leadership: aggressive vision, mastery over air strategy and tactics, and the ability to extract the maximum in fighting qualities from both men and equipment."

Of MacArthur, Kenney said, "This was an able general, the most able general we ever had, and one of the most able generals the world has ever seen."

THE LITTLE BULLDOG

Journalist Clare Boothe Luce fondly called Kenney a "scar-faced little bulldog

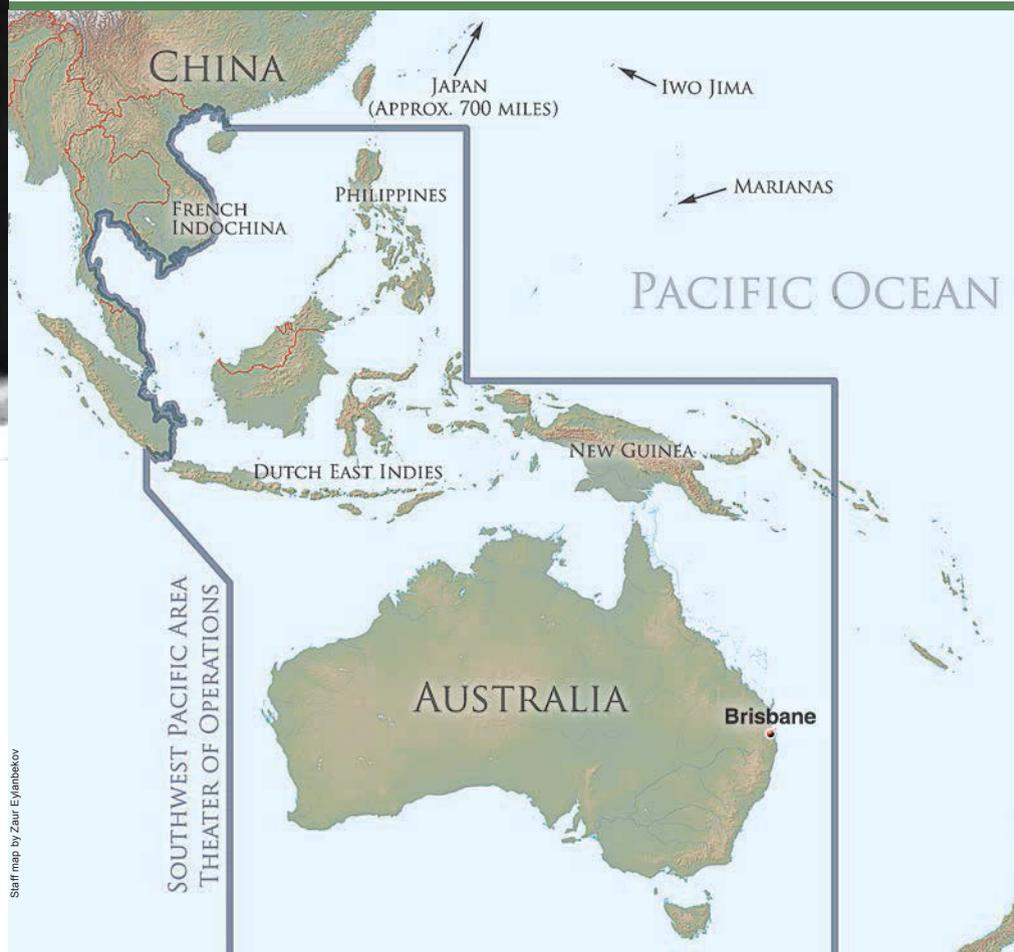
of a man." He stood five feet five-and-a-half inches tall and had a scar on his chin from an old aircraft accident.

Kenney left MIT, "bored," before graduation in 1911 and worked in construction and civil engineering jobs until joining the aviation cadets when the US entered World War I. He completed flight training, flew 75 missions in France, shot down two German airplanes, and was shot down once himself. He ended the war as a captain and remained in service, concentrating on aeronautical development and its application to warfare.

Kenney became known as an innovator. In 1924, he demonstrated that the firepower of an airplane could be increased by installing machine guns on the wings. Up to then, guns had been located only near the nose.

He was not part of the fraternity close to Arnold—which notably included Carl A. "Tooney" Spaatz and Ira C. Eaker—in the 1920s and 1930s, nor did he subscribe to their deep emphasis on high-altitude strategic bombing. He

SOUTHWEST PACIFIC AREA, WORLD WAR II



Staff map by Zaur Eylanbekov

what I know." When Kenney suggested they take the question to MacArthur, Sutherland uncharacteristically backed down.

A meeting with MacArthur was next. According to Kenney, he said that he knew how to run an air force, that he could produce results, and that he would be loyal to MacArthur. In return, "You be loyal to me and my gang and make this thing 50-50, or I'll be calling you from San Francisco and telling you that I have quit."

Whatever was said exactly, MacArthur took a liking to Kenney, who fortunately turned out to be every bit as good as he

was the developer and champion of low-altitude attack.

“I was the papa of attack aviation,” said Kenney, who was seldom modest. “I wrote the textbooks on it, taught it, developed the tactics. When World War II broke out, by that time, I was the only one who believed in attack aviation.”

As historian Phillip S. Meilinger has said, Kenney’s name “infrequently appears in accounts of the great air events of the interwar years. He did not participate in the air refueling demonstrations, long-range flights to Alaska and South America, or air races, or write inflammatory articles from a desk at Maxwell Field. Nevertheless, he was an excellent officer with a solid combat record.”

Kenney managed to stay in the doghouse of Maj. Gen. Oscar M. Westover, chief of the Air Corps, until Westover died in a 1938 aircraft accident and Arnold became chief. Arnold rescued Kenney from organizational purgatory and made him his troubleshooter. For the rest of his life, Kenney professed his friendship and harmony with Arnold but he rarely passed up a chance to express his differences. The two grated on each other regularly as the years went by.

“Hap and I understood each other, we respected each other’s judgment and were strong personal friends of over 20 years’ standing,” Kenney said. “He called me almost daily about a multitude of matters, some big, some little, and sometimes, I suspected, just to blow off a little excess steam. Hap lived with the throttle well open most of the time.” Much the same could be said of Kenney.

MACARTHUR’S PACIFIC DOMAIN

Before the war, MacArthur had been commander of US Army forces in the Far East with headquarters in the Philippines. In February 1942, just ahead of the Japanese takeover, President Roosevelt ordered MacArthur to evacuate to Australia to be commander of the newly organized Southwest Pacific Area.

Under the Allied division of responsibility in World War II, the Americans had command of the Pacific and the British had command of the Far East. The United States then split the Pacific into the Pacific Ocean Area, commanded by Adm. Chester W. Nimitz, and MacArthur’s SWPA, which included the Philippines, the Dutch East Indies, New Guinea, and Australia.

MacArthur set up his new headquarters in an insurance building in Brisbane. The Allied ground forces under his command were headed by an Australian

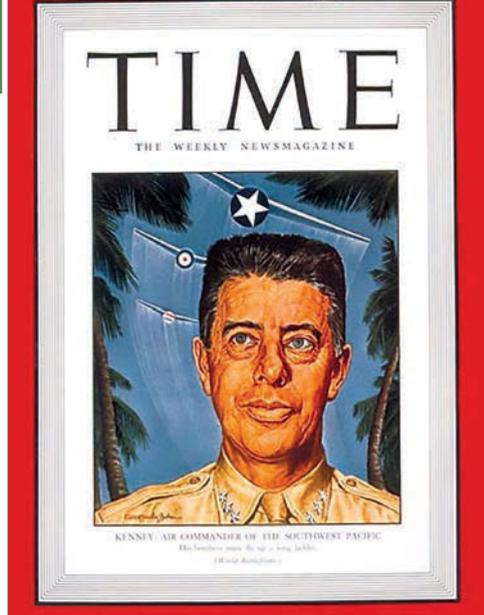
army general and the naval forces by a US admiral. His most effective forces, however, were the Allied air forces led by George Kenney—especially the American component, Fifth Air Force, which Kenney also commanded.

By early 1942, the Japanese line of conquest had reached the northern part of New Guinea. Their stronghold was Rabaul on the island of New Britain, northeast of New Guinea. Rabaul had a deep harbor with five airfields around it. The Japanese threatened to overrun the rest of the island and position themselves at Port Moresby on New Guinea’s southern coast, 300 miles across the Coral Sea from Australia.

The most advanced Allied base was at Port Moresby, where Kenney established the Advanced Echelon of Fifth Air Force, commanded by his able subordinate, Brig. Gen. Ennis C. Whitehead.

At the Arcadia conference in December 1941, the United States and Britain had agreed to a “Germany First” policy by which they would seek victory in Europe before making an all-out push in the Pacific. To the disgruntlement of MacArthur and Kenney, the Pacific was the second theater in more ways than one, including a lower priority for forces and resources.

BISMARCK SEA, MARCH 1943



Kenney made the cover of both Time magazine and LIFE magazine in 1943.

That brought the exceptional abilities of Kenney the innovator to the fore. Nobody was better at adapting what he had to fill his needs or at winning battles with limited means.

Kenney began by getting rid of the dead wood, although his claim that “within the first week, I got rid of a couple of major generals and a couple of brigadiers and about 40 colonels and lieutenant

colonels and one captain” overstates it somewhat.

He relied on Fifth Air Force as his main striking arm, with the Australian Royal Army Air Force concentrating on air defense of Australia and antisubmarine duties. In August 1942, Kenney’s total air strength was 517 combat aircraft, but of those only 150 were combat ready and most of the Australian aircraft were obsolete.

The Japanese offensive plan depended on sea transport of troops, equipment, and supplies from Rabaul, so Kenney applied his attack aviation tactics and improvisation skills to sinking merchant shipping and destroying Japanese airfields. His mechanics souped up the B-24 and B-25 and bombers with forward-firing .50 caliber guns.

They also rigged the A-20 attack aircraft with extra fuel tanks and racks to carry the “parafrog” bombs that Kenney had developed years before. Each of these munitions, dropped by parachute, contained hundreds of explosive fragments. “We took on this Jap airfield at Buna and destroyed 18 or 20 airplanes on the ground,” Kenney said. “We came in and made one pass over the place and dropped these parachute bombs. We must have used a couple hundred thousand parachute bombs during the war.”

His most famous innovation, though, was skip bombing, in which medium bombers and attack aircraft swept down on ships, releasing their bombs as low as 50 feet above the surface and skipping them across the water like flat stones until they struck their targets with devastating impact.

In the summer and fall of 1942, the Japanese landed at Buna and Milne Bay on the north shore of New Guinea, hoping to advance over the Owen Stanley mountains and capture Port Moresby. MacArthur needed airpower to stop them, and Kenney did not disappoint. Low-altitude attacks, mainly by Mitchell B-25 bombers, sank ships, hammered reinforcements and supplies, and threw back the Japanese assault. MacArthur praised what airpower had done and recommended Kenney for his third star.

BATTLE OF THE BISMARCK SEA

Prior to his triumphal return to the Philippines, MacArthur’s greatest victory in World War II was the Battle of the Bismarck Sea, March 1-3, 1943. It was a stunning feat by airpower and it sent MacArthur’s regard for Kenney soaring to new levels.

After their setback at Buna in 1942, the Japanese sought to resupply and re-

inforce their remaining garrisons on New Guinea. In February 1943, radio intercepts revealed the Japanese would send a large convoy in early March from Rabaul across the Bismarck Sea to Lae on the eastern coast of New Guinea.

Patrolling B-24s sighted a huge convoy off New Britain March 1. US and Australian air forces struck the convoy promptly, before it could reach the Vitiaz Strait leading into the Solomon Sea and Lae. The most dramatic results were achieved by Fifth Air Force B-25s and A-20s using skip bombing techniques.

Kenney claimed his airmen had sunk about a dozen transport vehicles and six destroyers, shot down 60 airplanes, and killed about 15,000 Japanese soldiers. MacArthur’s communiqué increased the numbers to 22 ships and more than 100 aircraft. The *New York Times* called it “one of the greatest triumphs of the war.”

As subsequently determined by US Intelligence, the actual toll was eight merchant vessels, four escort destroyers, 50 to 60 aircraft, and about 3,000 Japanese troops. It was still an astounding achievement, but MacArthur threatened to take action against those questioning his report and refused to make any changes.

“I do not appreciate the implication of exaggeration or falsification by myself and members of my command,” Kenney said in a cable to Arnold. “I can only speculate about the motives involved.”

Kenney made the cover of *LIFE* magazine March 22, which proclaimed him “Victor of the Bismarck Sea.” Two months previously, he had appeared on the cover of *Time*. Both magazines were published by Clare Boothe Luce’s husband, Henry Luce, who also thought well of Kenney.

Sutherland, for many years MacArthur’s chief of staff and closest aide, warned other Army officers not to quarrel with the air forces because MacArthur would always rule in favor of Kenney.

Kenney usually got along with the ground forces but he disliked the Navy and that relationship was never smooth.

As the war rolled on, Kenney chose increasingly to emphasize his standing as MacArthur’s airman and his independence from Hap Arnold. “Every once in a while, Arnold would get sore at me about something or another,” Kenney said in an oral history interview in 1974. “He



One innovation Kenney engineered was skip bombing, where low flying aircraft skipped bombs across a body of water until they hit the intended target and exploded. Here, a B-25 skips bombs off the water during a run at Wewak, New Guinea.

thought I was still working for him, but I wasn’t. I was working for MacArthur.”

Nevertheless, Kenney had to depend on the AAF for aircraft, supplies, and personnel. He complained loud and often about what he got and didn’t get. He was not inclined to cut Arnold any slack although the European theater was the first priority and there was a shortage of equipment everywhere.

In his memoirs, Kenney recalled a visit by Arnold to SWPA in 1942 and himself “chuckling at General MacArthur practically ordering Hap to give me anything I wanted.” Elsewhere Kenney recounted his telling MacArthur that he had sent Arnold a message saying, “You are 8,000 miles from this war,” whereupon “the old man laughed and said, ‘Goddamn it, that will fix him.’”

Another time, Kenney said, MacArthur told Arnold, “Don’t tell me what to do, and don’t tell him [Kenney] what to do.”

Kenney’s most serious rift with Arnold was over the new B-29 bomber, which Arnold was determined to use directly against the Japanese home islands. Kenney said, “If you want the B-29 used efficiently and effectively where it will



Hap Arnold (l) tours facilities at Manila, Philippines, with Kenney. Kenney often boasted of a close friendship with Arnold, but Arnold spoke of Kenney far less often.

do the most good in the shortest time, the Southwest Pacific is the place and Fifth Air Force can do the job.”

Kenney wanted to use the B-29s on oil refineries in the East Indies and speed up MacArthur’s drive northward. He predicted, erroneously, that B-29 operations against Japan from bases in the Marianas would amount to nothing more than “nuisance raids” and that “the Japs would shoot them out of the air.” To Arnold’s exasperation, Kenney kept up his demand for B-29s long after the issue was decided.

In June 1944, SWPA gained the Thirteenth Air Force from the neighboring South Pacific Area. Kenney became commander of Far East Air Forces, which included both Fifth and Thirteenth Air Forces. He remained commander of Allied Air Forces as well.

MacArthur recommended Kenney for promotion to four-star general, declaring that “nothing [AAF commander in Europe Lt. Gen. Carl] Spaatz or any other air officer has accomplished in the war compares to what Kenney has contributed and none in my opinion is his equal in ability.” By then, MacArthur, like Marshall, Eisenhower, and Arnold, was already a five-star general.

Kenney was promoted March 9, 1945, with a date of rank two days earlier than Spaatz, who was also promoted. When Arnold retired in 1946, his chosen successor was Spaatz, not Kenney.

POSTWAR SLIPPAGE

In January 1946, Kenney was appointed senior US representative to the United Nations military staff. The idea of a UN force to keep peace in the world had been floated and the prospect

was that Kenney would command the UN air force.

Three months later, Kenney was named commander of the new US Strategic Air Command, concurrent with his duties at the UN, and Kenney’s focus remained on the UN. He was often absent and left the running of SAC to his deputy, Maj. Gen. St. Clair Streett, who had commanded Thirteenth Air Force in the South Pacific.

There was no sense of urgency as Streett declared, “No major strategic threat or requirement now exists, in the opinion of our country’s best strategists nor will such a requirement exist for the next three to five years.”

In October, Kenney made big news when the Associated Press reported him as saying the answer to world peace was “the eventual abolition of all national armies, navies, and air corps in favor of an international force.” Kenney said, “This may take years and years to accomplish, but the real answer lies with the countries of the world turning over their forces to the United Nations.”

The *Chicago Tribune* called on him to resign, saying, “General Kenney confuses his loyalty” and that he had disqualified himself for taking command of SAC or other positions of responsibility for national defense.

Mercifully, the UN notion soon disappeared from sight and history but not before *Air Force Magazine*, in transition from an official AAF publication to the journal of the newly formed Air Force Association, published a supportive cover story, “Building the United Nations Air Force,” in the December 1947 issue.

Meanwhile, Maj. Gen. Clements McMullen—who had run Kenney’s depots during the war—replaced Streett as vice commander of SAC and instituted policies designed to cut costs and reduce the required number of officers per aircrew from five to three. McMullen also put large numbers of good nonrated officers out of the service. Readiness plummeted, and so did morale.

Cross-grained as ever, Kenney refused to support the B-36 bomber, a top priority program for the Air Force, saying, “There is no future for this airplane” and continued to oppose it openly after the production decision was made.

In April 1948, Kenney was again passed over for Chief of Staff as Hoyt

S. Vandenberg was selected instead. Vandenberg assigned Kenney to Air University—up to then a two-star command—and called in Lt. Gen. Curtis E. LeMay to rebuild SAC. McMullen was sent to the San Antonio Air Materiel Area, which was a better match for his talents.

HAP SUMS IT UP

During his tour at Maxwell, Kenney wrote two books. His memoir, *General Kenney Reports*, came out in 1949. In June 1951, he published *The MacArthur I Know*, in which he said, “I am a MacArthur man. I consider him one of our greatest statesmen and leaders, and the best general that this country has ever produced.”

When Kenney retired from the Air Force Aug. 31, 1951, the *Washington Post* said in an editorial, “Opinions vary greatly on some of the theories of Air Force Gen. George C. Kenney, who retired on Friday, but there can be no doubt whatever of his competence as a general and as one of the real heroes of the war against Japan. Things were never dull around him, for General Kenney was no parlor soldier.”

From 1951 to 1964, Kenney was president of the National Arthritis and Rheumatism Foundation. He was national president of the Air Force Association 1953-1954 and chairman of the board 1954-1955.

He made headlines again in 1957 when he said in a speech that the Soviet Union and other Communist nations should be kicked out of the United Nations. “They have declared war against the free world,” he said. “They haven’t lived up to the charter from the very start, and it’s about time they were expelled.”

The official Soviet newspaper *Izvestia* called Kenney a “high-ranking lunatic” and said he “should be placed in a strait jacket.” Kenney loved it.

Kenney later moved to Florida, where he died in 1977.

The definitive appreciation of Kenney was from his longtime friend and foil, Hap Arnold. “It may be truthfully said that no air commander ever did so much with so little,” Arnold said in a letter to Kenney at the end of the war. “All that you have ever done since has made air history. The Army Air Forces honor your fighting spirit, to which we so largely owe today’s splendid triumph.” ★

John T. Correll was editor in chief of Air Force Magazine for 18 years and is now a contributor. His most recent article, “How Rolling Thunder Began,” appeared in the March issue.