

He was a superb leader and organizer. He also knew how to get along with MacArthur.

The Genius of George Kenney

IT may truthfully be said that no air commander ever did so much with so little.” Thus did Gen. Henry H. “Hap” Arnold, Commanding General, Army Air Forces, describe Gen. George C. Kenney, commander of Far East Air Forces, at the close of World War II.

George Churchill Kenney was a kind of renaissance airman. He was an engineer, flier, logistician, tactician, strategist, and exceptional leader. It can be said that, as an operational airman, he was first among equals during World War II.

Arnold inserted Kenney into trouble spots because he considered him to be a tinkerer and a doer who could resolve difficult problems.

Kenney probably faced his greatest challenge in the Pacific in the period 1942–43, and he had limited resources to meet it. As Kenney emphasized to Arnold, he was operating on a shoestring. He pulled it off brilliantly because he had long ago mastered the intricacies of airmanship.

Born on Aug. 6, 1889, Kenney grew up in Brookline, Mass. He spent three years at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. While taking flying training under Bert Acosta, a crack flier, Kenney showed the flair and confidence that subsequently distinguished his career.

Kenney landed dead-stick on his first landing. He recalled that Acosta asked, “What is the idea, coming in there dead-stick?” Kenney replied, “Any damned fool can land it if the motor is running” and added, “I just wanted to see what would happen in case the motor quit.”

During World War I, Kenney flew 75 missions, downed two German aircraft, was shot down himself, and was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross and Silver Star. Afterward, he decided to make Army aviation a career. He soon gained a reputation for technical and tactical innovation, as well as for candor and wit.

When Brig. Gen. Frank M. Andrews was appointed in March 1935 to command the General Headquarters Air Force, he tapped Kenney to be his assistant chief of staff for operations and training. In this key post on the GHQ Air Force staff, Kenney had responsibility for combat flying training.

And along with assumption of this position, Kenney was promoted to lieutenant colonel, his first promotion in 17 years.

Andrews knew Kenney well from the Air Corps Tactical School, where from 1927 to 1928 Kenney was an instructor and Andrews a student. Andrews had been impressed with Kenney’s ability to explain technical problems and to find solutions to them. At the tactical school, Kenney developed doctrine and revised the basic attack aviation textbook.

At GHQ Air Force, Kenney emphasized training in instrument and night flying. He also wrote tables of organization and planned maneuvers and traveled extensively. “During the first year,” Kenney noted, “I was home at Langley Field [Va.] something like 39 days; the rest of the time I was all over the country.”

His tenure at GHQ didn’t last long, however. Kenney’s outspoken and

By Herman S. Wolk





Kennedy (center) talks with Gen. Carl A. "Tooe" Spaatz (left) and Gen. Douglas A. MacArthur at an airfield near Tokyo on Aug. 30, 1945.

sometimes biting verbal manner caused him to run afoul of the War Department General Staff.

Like Andrews, Kenney championed the new B-17 long-range bomber, but the General Staff did not want to hear this. "They said there was no sense in having an airplane as big as that," recalled Kenney. "They didn't like some of the remarks I made because I was a temporary lieutenant colonel and a permanent captain, and these were all major generals." As a result, the War Department banished him to Ft. Benning, Ga., where, during the period 1936–38, he taught tactics at the Infantry School.

Maj. Gen. Oscar Westover, Chief of the Air Corps, undoubtedly had a hand in Kenney's treatment. Westover and Andrews were at loggerheads. Andrews advocated more B-17s and autonomy for the Air Corps, while Westover preferred not to rock the boat.

It was Arnold, then a brigadier general and assistant chief of the Air Corps, who rescued Kenney. He assigned him to various special projects in Washington, D.C.

The Troubleshooter

When Westover was killed in an air crash in 1938 and Arnold became Chief of the Air Corps, one of his first actions was to send Kenney to a trouble spot at Wright Field, Ohio. Kenney went out to head the production engineering section of the Air Corps materiel division.

"Every time [Arnold] got some-

thing going wrong," Kenney recalled, "he would say, 'Send George Kenney out there; he is a lucky SOB. He will straighten it out.' I never was supposed to have any brains. I was just lucky."

Following the Nazi invasion of Poland in late 1939, Arnold ordered Kenney to France to study French aircraft and equipment and also to assess the Luftwaffe. Kenney returned home and reported that American military aviation was far behind what the German air force was flying.

After Japanese forces attacked Pearl Harbor in December 1941, the United States moved to organize its forces in the Pacific and to begin preliminary planning aimed at the defeat of Japan.

To organize for victory in the Pacific, however, Arnold first needed to assign an energetic and aggressive officer to replace the air commander under Gen. Douglas A. MacArthur, commanding general of the Southwest Pacific Theater.

According to Arnold and Gen. George C. Marshall, Army Chief of Staff, MacArthur's air commander, Lt. Gen. George H. Brett, was in wrong with MacArthur and his staff. Marshall said the situation was rife with clashes of personalities.

Brett had in fact been shut off from MacArthur and his staff.

Arnold wanted to send Lt. Gen. Frank Andrews, who was then commanding Caribbean Defense Command. However, Andrews turned him down. He was appalled that Arnold

thought he would work for MacArthur, with whom he had battled in the 1930s and whom he detested.

It was Brig. Gen. Laurence S. Kuter, deputy chief of the Air Staff, who suggested to Arnold that he send Kenney to MacArthur. Arnold thought the blunt talking Kenney probably wouldn't last long out there.

Kenney, however, had two things going for him. First, he knew how to organize air forces to gain maximum combat efficiency and effectiveness. Second, he was an experienced airman with the ability to lead.

Before he left Washington, though, Kenney realized that one of the major difficulties he would face related to Allied strategy. Marshall and Arnold had made it clear to him that the European conflict was the top military priority.

Kenney noted that he was supposed to help MacArthur hold the line in the Pacific "until the European show is cleared up."

Removing Deadwood

The emphasis on the European theater was bound to affect the flow of equipment to the Southwest Pacific. Moreover, Kenney knew that he had to straighten out difficult personnel and logistical problems in his new assignment.

With Arnold and Marshall, Kenney raised the issue of removing some officers among his new staff. "I am going to get rid of a lot of the Air Corps deadwood," Kenney informed them.

Upon arriving in the theater, Kenney found logistics to be "a hell of a mess." Combat aircraft were not able to get into the air. Spare parts were nowhere to be found. "A lot of stuff has gone out there," Kenney said, "but no one knows what has happened to it."

There were even complaints from the field that requests for parts were turned down because of improperly filled out requisition forms. Kenney made clear that he was putting an end to this practice. "You don't win wars with file cabinets," he said.

Before he could tackle the logistics issue, he had to face MacArthur. According to Brett, neither MacArthur nor his staff possessed an understanding of air operations. Yet, he said, after conferring only with his immediate staff, MacArthur made all decisions himself.

Moreover, Brett emphasized that Maj. Gen. Richard K. Sutherland, MacArthur's chief of staff, was a bully and overly protective of the boss.

To reach MacArthur, Kenney had to get past Sutherland, who had shut Brett out and had taken it upon himself to write air operations orders.

“What I Know”

Kenney decided to confront Sutherland. In a meeting, he jabbed a dot onto a piece of paper. As he thrust it before MacArthur's chief of staff, he said, “The dot represents what you know about air operations, the entire rest of the paper what I know.”

When Sutherland reacted belligerently, Kenney suggested they see MacArthur. Sutherland backed down.

Brett had told Kenney that he rarely saw MacArthur and added, “Every endeavor I have made to explain what I was trying to do has been lost among lengthy dissertations which I would not take the time to deliver to a second lieutenant.”

Now, it was Kenney's turn. He recalled, “I listened to a lecture for approximately an hour on the shortcomings of the Air Force in general and the Allied Air Forces in the Southwest Pacific in particular.”

The air forces, MacArthur charged, had done nothing.

Kenney interrupted and told him that *he* would take care of air operations. He added, “If, for any reason, I found that I couldn't work for him, I would tell him so and do everything in my power to get relieved.”

According to Kenney, MacArthur grinned, put his hand on his shoulder, and said, “I think we are going to get along together all right.”

Meanwhile, the situation in the Southwest Pacific had turned critical. Japanese forces had stormed through the southern Philippines, most of New Guinea, and the islands northeast of Australia. An invasion of the Australian continent seemed possible.

Prior to Kenney's arrival in the theater in July 1942, Japan had taken heavy losses in the Coral Sea and Midway battles. Despite that, Japanese troops had established positions in the Solomon Islands and were advancing in New Guinea across the Owen Stanley mountain range toward Port Moresby.

Kenney immediately focused on building an organization that could

meet the demands of the theater. In early August 1942, he established Fifth Air Force in Brisbane, Australia, 1,000 miles from the New Guinea front. He appointed Brig. Gen. Ennis C. Whitehead, his deputy, as commander of the Fifth Air Force advanced echelon at Port Moresby.

MacArthur planned to move his forces northwest along the northern coast of New Guinea toward the Markham Valley and Finschhafen.

Owning the Air

For that to succeed, Kenney emphasized to MacArthur, the Allied Air Forces had to gain air superiority over Japanese forces. Kenney said that the Allies had to “own the air over New Guinea.” He added that there was no use talking about “playing across the street” until the Allies got the Japanese troops “off of our front lawn.”

Once having gained control of the air, Fifth Air Force would support the ground forces and hammer enemy shipping troop concentrations. The Allies would advance northward up the New Guinea coast, and ultimately the island-hopping campaign would succeed.

Kenney knew that MacArthur's strategy depended upon aerial resupply.

He had to straighten out the chaotic maintenance and supply systems. He made certain that critical equipment found its way from Australia to New Guinea.

Kenney noted he was “inventing new ways to win a war on a shoestring.” He explained, “We are doing things nearly every day that were never in the books” and added, “It really is remarkable what you can do with an airplane if you really try; anytime I can't think of something screwy enough, I have a flock of people out here to help me. ... We carry troops to war, feed them, supply them with ammunition, artillery, clothes, shoes, and evacuate their wounded.”

By the end of 1942, MacArthur had gained confidence in Kenney. The feeling, apparently, was mutual. “It is a lot of fun to talk to General MacArthur,” Kenney maintained. “He thinks clearly, does not have preconceived ideas, weighs every factor, and plays the winning game for all it's worth. As soon as airpower could show him anything, he bought it.”

Kenney definitely showed him something. By early 1943, Fifth Air Force had gained air superiority, putting MacArthur's forces in a position to turn the tide of war.

In March 1943, Kenney's fliers, aided by Australian airmen, dealt Japan a crippling blow in the Battle of the Bismarck Sea. He employed skip-bombing, a concept he developed in 1928 while at the tactical school.

In this case, B-25s and some A-20s went in very low, skipping bombs over the water to strike an enemy convoy. Japan suffered heavy losses.



Kenney's airmen, flying A-20s and B-25s, like these, used “skip-bombing” and low-altitude bomb release to devastate a Japanese convoy during the Battle of the Bismarck Sea in March 1943.

Allied aircraft sank 12 of 16 ships in the convoy and killed approximately 2,900 troops.

Tackling Washington

Kenney was continually frustrated by the Europe-first strategy and did not appreciate Arnold's description of the Southwest Pacific as a "defensive" theater. He badgered Arnold at every opportunity for airplanes to conduct offensive operations.

Arnold explained that he could not "maintain every theater at offensive strength" as this "dispersed effort would invite disaster." His objective, he informed Kenney, was to keep Kenney's forces at sufficient strength to enable Kenney to support himself defensively and to carry out a limited offensive against the Japanese.

Kenney made several trips to Washington, always keeping in mind the need to balance his loyalty to MacArthur, as theater commander, with his loyalty to Arnold, the AAF boss. On one trip, though, Kenney held discussions with Undersecretary of War Robert P. Patterson and Assistant Secretary of War for Air Robert A. Lovett and then met with President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

To Roosevelt and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, he emphasized the need to replace his losses to maintain air superiority. Roosevelt asked Kenney to "be reasonable about it," saying he would see what he could do even if he had "to argue with the whole British Empire about it."

Later, Arnold informed Kenney that the JCS would be sending him several bomb groups and several fighter groups.

In the summer of 1943, Kenney began to campaign for B-29s to be deployed to the Southwest Pacific. It is, he stated, "the plane with which we are to win the war."

Kenney's concept was to hurl the very-long-range bombers against the oil refineries at Palembang, Sumatra, and Balikpapan, Borneo. "If you want the B-29 used efficiently and effectively, where it will do the most good in the shortest time," he told Arnold, "the Southwest Pacific area is the place, and the Fifth Air Force can do the job. ... Japan may easily collapse back to her original empire by that time (1944), due to her oil shortage alone."

However, this was one battle that Kenney would not win. Arnold had long ago determined that the B-29 would be employed solely against the Japanese home islands. And the AAF Chief was not about to relinquish the B-29s to a theater commander—in this case, MacArthur.

Nonetheless, Fifth Air Force intensified its efforts to support MacArthur's drive up the north coast of New Guinea toward Lae and Salamaua. Kenney's forces had been striking Rabaul, but now their attention turned to Wewak, where Japan had a large concentration of aircraft.

In mid-August 1943, Fifth Air Force bombers and P-38 pursuit aircraft attacked the Wewak airdromes,

destroying about 175 enemy aircraft on the ground. As a result of this devastating strike, Japan had to base its forces farther to the rear, leaving Lae and Salamaua vulnerable.

Airlift in Action

Both Lae and Salamaua fell in September 1943 to MacArthur's offensive. Kenney had made that possible by orchestrating the first large-scale airlift of the war. Kenney's C-47 transports air-dropped 1,700 troops and an Australian artillery battery into Nadzab, 19 miles northwest of Lae.

The scale of the airlift operation was daunting. In fact, MacArthur, when he was briefed, asked Kenney whether he had discussed the airlift with MacArthur's staff. Learning that he hadn't done so yet, MacArthur exclaimed, "Well, don't, you will scare them to death!"

Meanwhile, air operations by Fifth Air Force in 1943–44 against the Rabaul complex of harbor and airfields rendered the area practically useless to Japanese forces.

By mid-1944, MacArthur and Kenney picked up the pace. Ground forces occupied Hollandia as well as Wakde, Biak, Owi, Woendi, and Numfoor Islands. At the same time, Kenney joined Thirteenth Air Force with Fifth Air Force as part of Far East Air Forces. Whitehead took command of Fifth Air Force.

MacArthur's accelerated offensive moves and Kenney's shift of Thirteenth Air Force into FEAF set the stage for MacArthur's return to the Philippines.

The invasion of the Philippines had been moved up from December 1944 to October 1944. Sixth Army landed on the east coast of Leyte Gulf on Oct. 20. And when Allied forces landed on Luzon in January 1945, no enemy aircraft opposed them.

Kenney's FEAF, along with Navy aircraft, destroyed hundreds of Japanese airplanes on the ground. By March 1945, Manila had fallen. (Also in March, on a trip to Washington, Kenney was personally informed by President Roosevelt that he would receive his fourth star.)

Following the capture of Iwo Jima and with the invasion of Okinawa in April 1945, Fifth Air Force used Okinawa to launch strikes against Kyushu, one of the Japanese home islands. In July 1945, Brig. Gen.



Kenney's Fifth Air Force bombers and fighters destroyed some 175 enemy aircraft on the ground at Wewak, New Guinea. Here, B-25s make a minimum altitude bombing run on a Wewak airstrip.

Thomas D. White's Seventh Air Force joined FEAF and teamed up with Fifth to strike Kyushu and enemy shipping.

Meanwhile, Arnold's plan to use the B-29s for direct attacks against the Japanese home islands had taken shape. In April 1944, the Joint Chiefs had approved creation of Twentieth Air Force, based in Washington, D.C., with Arnold as executive agent of the JCS.

In March 1944, Kuter, Arnold's deputy, gave Kenney the bad news, at which time Kenney's pique got the better of his judgment. B-29 raids against Japan from the Marianas, he said, would accomplish little; they would be just "nuisance raids."

Nonetheless, Japan, by mid-1945, was being strangled by blockade and hammered by the B-29 campaign.

At the Potsdam Conference in July 1945, President Truman ordered use of the atomic bomb against Imperial Japan. In late July, Gen. Carl A. "Tooe" Spaatz arrived on Guam to head the newly established Strategic Air Forces in the Pacific.

After receiving authorization from Truman and Marshall, Spaatz ordered the use of the atomic bomb. On Aug. 6, 1945, the US struck Hiroshima, and on Aug. 9, it hit Nagasaki. The next day, Japan asked for peace.

Toward an Independent Air Force

The war was over, but Kenney had more work to do. He became the point man for unification of the War and Navy Departments and a truly independent air arm.

In the immediate post-World War II period, when hopes were high for the success of the United Nations organization, Kenney was named the senior US member of the UN Military Staff committee. This committee had been organized to assist the Security Council on military issues and potentially to implement plans for creation of a UN military force.

Kenney's post at the UN did not last long, though. In early 1946, Spaatz and Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower agreed on a postwar reorganization for the air forces, establishing Strategic Air Command, Tactical Air Command (upon which Eisenhower had insisted), and Air Defense Command. Spaatz appointed Kenney as SAC's first commanding general.

However, Kenney spent little time in the position. Instead, with the battle



After the war, Kenney testified before Congress for both a separate air arm and a unified department of armed services. He also lectured coast to coast on the importance of an independent Air Force.

over unification approaching a climax in 1947, Kenney was encouraged by W. Stuart Symington, assistant secretary of war for air, and Spaatz to go on the road to speak about the need for a separate air force. Knowledgeable and articulate, Kenney advocated an independent Air Force to audiences from coast to coast.

Kenney left the running of SAC's daily operations to his deputy—initially Maj. Gen. St. Clair Streett and then Maj. Gen. Clements McMullen. Although McMullen was an excellent supply and maintenance man, the training of SAC's combat crews suffered.

Meanwhile, the Cold War heated up, and in the summer of 1948, the Soviet Union began the Berlin Blockade. Gen. Hoyt S. Vandenberg, who succeeded Spaatz in April 1948 as Air Force Chief of Staff, asked Charles Lindbergh to assess SAC's combat readiness. Lindbergh reported in September that SAC's readiness left a great deal to be desired.

As a result, Vandenberg and Symington decided, in October, to replace Kenney with Gen. Curtis E. LeMay, commander of the US Air Forces in Europe and architect of the B-29 campaign against Japan.

Kenney was assigned as com-

mander of Air University at Maxwell AFB, Ala. While there, he wrote *General Kenney Reports: A Personal History of the Pacific War*, which is characteristically candid and one of the very best memoirs of the war. He retired in August 1951 and continued writing, including a book about MacArthur.

MacArthur had quickly recognized that Kenney was a man who had a plan and, what's more, got results. Over and above everything else, Kenney was a straight shooter and true to himself.

After the war, MacArthur had this to say about Kenney: "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 exact the maximum in fighting qualities from both men and equipment."

As Kenney's Fifth Air Force director of operations, Lt. Col. Francis C. Gideon, observed in retrospect, "He was unique; for the war to be fought in the Southwest Pacific under General MacArthur, he may have been the only one who could have succeeded." ■

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