

Lieutenant General George Churchill Kenney was born on 6 August 1889 in Nova Scotia. His family moved for business reasons back and forth across the Canadian-US border, but by the time George Kenney joined the US military forces in 1917, to be a pilot, there is no record of his having applied for US citizenship before that time. One of the most innovative of all US air commanders was actually Canadian, though he never admitted this and always claimed to be an American.

George Kenney ended the First World War with a good amount of operational experience and also a firm ideas of what was necessary to form and sustain an air force at war. He was able to apply much of this experience and his ideas in the years between the wars, during his service in the US Army Air Corps.

He arrived in Australia in July 1942 and assumed command of the Allied Air forces in early August. He found a situation which would have daunted many other men, but Kenney realised that here was a great opportunity to show what could be done by proper use of air power in the Papua New Guinea area. Because the region was undeveloped, he soon realised that air power would be the vital factor for success, despite the dangerous weather, the climate, and lack of facilities everywhere in the war zone.

Never a man to be overpowered by difficulties, Kenney set to work to make radical changes designed to get the best from what he had. Officers unable to put aside the complicated peacetime procedures for staff work and supply operations were removed from their commands; officers who understood Kenney's ideas and were willing to lead combat squadrons or to ensure that logistical support was timely were appointed to command. Everything was to be done to keep aircraft and crews able to strike the enemy.

Kenney organised the first major airlift of Allied ground troops in WW2 in September 1942, when he used every available aircraft to fly US infantry from Australia to New Guinea, to prove that airlift was faster than sealift. Kenney worked unrelentingly to develop tactics and techniques for close air support of the ground forces in battle, aerial resupply by landing, by parachute and air drops, and long range bombing of strategic targets, such as Rabaul. He supported junior commanders who wanted to revise or change procedures developed in peacetime.

In addition to providing the maximum amount of close air support to ground forces, Kenney was responsible for organising the first major air supply effort in the Allied forces, in any theatre of war, to provide men and materials to the Australian and US forces on the northern side of the Papua New Guinea mountain ranges, during the conclusion of the Kokoda campaign and throughout the Buna-Gona campaign. Allied sea lift was, at that time, too small to do so and no land routes capable of such effort existed. Without this air lift, the Allied ground forces on the northern coast would have been in a most dangerous situation, unable to fight, unable to retreat, and subject to Japanese offensive action and disease. In contrast, the Japanese air commanders displayed their lack of understanding of air power, by doing nothing to evolve their own tactics and techniques, and failure to develop air field sites, as Kenney's forces did.

The first eight months of Kenney's command were a time of searching for ideas, testing them, and developing techniques. At the end of that time, in March 1943, a decisive air action in March resulted in the total destruction of the Japanese convoy to Lae, when all eight transport ships and four of the eight escorting destroyers were sunk. This changed the balance of power in the region. One Australian who was central to this victory was Group Captain WH Garing DFC, who is included in this section.

General Kenney used his air strength as he had envisaged, to attack the Japanese presence unceasingly, by day and night, wherever it might be found. Once the formidable P-38 Lightning and P-47 Thunderbolt were supplied, these fighters ranged to the limits of their fuel seeking

Japanese aircraft in the air or on the ground, while bombers of all types attacked any sign of Japanese activity.

In August 1943, Kenney had his air units plan and execute one of the most daring series of attacks by any air force in the Second World War. When he learned that the four airfields in the Wewak area were becoming crowded with Japanese aircraft, Kenney's squadrons launched a devastating series of morning attacks which resulted in the almost total destruction of the Japanese army air force in New Guinea. In September, as well as supporting the amphibious invasion at Lae, Kenney's air units made the parachute drop on Nadzab and secured that area in conjunction with the seaborne attack. In October and November, he switched his effort from the west, to Rabaul in the east and to Cape Gloucester, then to the Admiralties, to complete the isolation of Rabaul. In March and April 1944, Kenney launched his squadrons in another series of attacks on the Wewak and Hollandia bases and repeated the destruction of the Japanese air units. But all the while this series of powerful attacks was in progress, the Allied air forces continued to support the advancing Allied land forces.

The effort of the Allied air forces under Kenney was a constant evolution of the techniques of application of air power, and embraced selection and development of air field sites, air resupply and air lift, parachute operations, fighter, ground attack, heavy bomber and maritime interdiction operations, with local field modifications to improve performance. The Japanese army and navy air forces opposing him failed in every one of these aspects of the air war.

By July 1944, Kenney's air forces were operating in the Dutch territories and planning the advance to the Philippines. One year later, Kenney's squadrons were bombing Japan itself. Kenney continually led his officers and men in seeking ways to improve the overall effectiveness and efficiency of the air forces fighting over some of the most undeveloped and hostile areas in the world. Their achievements were limited only by the technical capabilities of their equipment.

In three years of ceaseless effort General Kenney's air units had advanced the 'bomb line' from Port Moresby to Japan. No other air force covered such an area of the globe and no other air commander exerted such influence on his theatre of operations.

Apart from General Douglas MacArthur, the Allied commander-in-chief, no other person made such a difference to the campaigns in the Papua New Guinea area.

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Suggested reading:

Thomas E. Griffith, Jr: "MacArthur's Airman – General George C. Kenney and the War in the Southwest Pacific" ; UP of Kansas, USA, 1998.