

Mar 26 Doctrine Paragon-Major General Kenney in the Southwest Pacific

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By LeMay Center Staff

This month, the LeMay Center highlights the efforts of Maj Gen George Kenney and air forces he commanded in the Battle of the Bismark Sea during World War 2. As the “air boss” for Southwest Pacific Theater commander Gen Douglas MacArthur, Gen Kenney was in effect one of the first functional air component commanders. His innovative countersea tactics are an exemplar for today’s ongoing operations in the Persian Gulf and Strait of Hormuz.



As Japanese offensive action in the South Pacific culminated in late 1942, US and Australian forces began a slow grind up the north coast of New Guinea and the nearby Solomon island chain, intent on securing lines of communication between Australia and the US. The island of New Britain sat in their way with large Japanese bases at Rabaul and Lae. Beyond them lay the Bismark Sea, which the Japanese used to keep Rabaul, Lae, and other bases in the region supplied by maritime convoys.

Kenney had a small and somewhat ragtag air force at his disposal: a handful of B-17 and B-24 heavy bombers, Marine Corps fighters, some Australian light bombers, occasional aid from US Navy carrier aircraft, and a fair number of AAF medium-range B-25s and A-20s. Taking inspiration from the Australians, Kenney and his ingenious team of pilots, engineers, and mechanics outfitted his A-20s and B-25s for strafing and low-altitude bombing. His B-25C-1s, for instance, sported eight forward-firing .50cal machine guns. His crews experimented with parachute-equipped bombs (designed by Kenney himself), new fuses designed for very low-altitude release, and “skip bombing”—dropping bombs so they skipped across the water at a target like a rock on a pond. All this innovation made Kenney’s light bombers near-perfect weapons for destroying ships at sea.

During the spring and summer of 1943, Kenney's bombers perfected their new tactics against the Japanese across the Bismark Sea, destroying tens of thousands of tons of shipping and effectively isolating Rabaul and Lae. Kenney and his staff also proved adept at putting together aerial task forces optimized for very disparate tasks: heavy bombers ferrying provisions to keep isolated ground forces supplied; twin-engine P-38 fighters modified for long-range reconnaissance patrols; bomber formations designed for larger conveys striking from high (B-17s and -24s), medium (B-25s), and "mast-height" altitudes (A-20s and Australian Beau fighters), almost simultaneously, to complicate matters for Japanese convoy gunners and accompanying fighter escorts.

Kenney's strategy supporting MacArthur turned tactical innovation into success at the operational level, enabling surface forces to take or isolate many Japanese bases in preparation for re-taking the Philippines in 1944. Gen MacArthur's success in the Southwest Pacific would not have been possible without his "combined force air component commander's" ragtag joint and multinational air force.

Why it matters today: The air component commander's strategy defines how he or she plans to use airpower to achieve the joint force commander's (JFC's) objectives. The air component commander's vision and intent are the foundation on which that strategy is built. At the same time, the specialized competence of the air component commander, as an Airman, plays a key role in the effective employment of airpower. The air component commander's expertise in building a strategy to support the JFC's campaign is crucial to successful joint operations. In particular, the current conflicts in the Caribbean and Iran have highlighted the importance of countersea missions in all aspects of airpower, controlled in a distributed manner from many bases, while centrally commanded by the JFC's air component commander.

For more on Air Force's doctrine concerning the air component commander, see Air Force Doctrine Publication (AFDP) 3-01.1, *Command and Control*. For more on countersea, see AFDP 3-04, *Countersea Operations*. You can also explore our doctrine podcast library on iTunes, Spotify, Amazon Music, or at www.doctrine.af.mil.