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**The Last Full Measure (63) – George
Kennny, Skip-Bombing and the Battle
of Bismarck Sea**

Lead: For 400 years service men and women have fought to carve out and defend freedom and the civilization we know as America. This series on A Moment in Time is devoted to the memory of those warriors, whose devotion gave, in the words of Lincoln at Gettysburg, the last full measure.

Intro.: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: Military innovation is often born of desperate

circumstances. When Maj. General George Kenney took over allied air operations in the Southwest Pacific in summer 1942 he faced a daunting set of problems. He had to craft a working relationship with his boss, the brilliant if imperious theater commander General Douglas MacArthur, who had little respect for air power despite the fact that it was the chief offensive weapon he had at his disposal in those perilous months. He had to shape an effective alliance with the Australian Air Force whose two top Air Marshalls detested each other. Then he had to overcome a Japanese enemy whose planes outnumbered his own and up to that point were everywhere ascendant in that part of the Pacific.

Kenney re-organized the allied air structure and convinced the Australians to work together by working with him, he won over MacArthur by demonstrating loyalty and helping the “old man” develop a winning strategy, and he dealt with the Japanese with innovative tactics and constant attacks that helped halt their victorious march toward Australia within months of his arrival on station.

One of the most creative ways he was able to make do with a shortage of aircraft was to develop new ways of using the ones he had. On the way out to Australia in August 1942, Kenney and his aide Major William Benn

discussed ways out of their dilemma and decided to try skip bombing, a tactic that had not been tried in that theater. The idea was to attack enemy shipping broadside with land-based aircraft flying very low above the water, as low as 50 feet, and releasing a delayed fused bomb about 100 feet out, which would skip across the water like a rock on a pond, hit the side, sink down and blow out the bottom of the enemy ship.

Almost immediately upon arrival in Australia, he alerted his commanders to the technique and set them to practicing in the harbor at Port Moresby in Southeast New Guinea. They practiced their runs on an old U.S. Navy ship that had run

aground and soon became very good at dropping 500 pound bombs from large bombers such as B-17s, B-24s and B-25s.

The technique would be put to good use when in early March 1943 intelligence reported that a 16 ship fleet, composed of eight destroyers escorting troop transports with nearly 6000 Japanese troops, had left the northern port of Rabaul headed to the main island port of Lae. Shielded by Japanese Navy and Army fighters and covered by bad weather, the invasion fleet was making good progress through the Bismarck Sea until the morning of March 2nd. Kenney ordered his bombers into the attack and over the next two days,

using skip bombing and almost constant attacks all of the Japanese transports and several destroyers had been either sunk or were fast on the way to such a fate. After the Allied victory in the Battle of Bismarck Sea, the use of skip bombing and other innovative tactics severely restricted the ability of Japan to supply its isolated garrisons in the Southwest Pacific. Skip bombing demonstrated the devastating power of land-based aircraft with allied air forces seeing their "hit rate" of bombs against Japanese shipping rise from less than 1% to over 70%.

Research by Laura Musser, at the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.

Resources

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<http://www.kensmen.com/mar43.html>

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