

October 1990, Vol. 73, No. 10

## Valor

By John L. Frisbee, Contributing Editor

### Courage and Conviction

*The skirmishes and battles that led to an independent Air Force were fought in Washington as well as in the field. Ken Walker was a hero in both arenas.*

Kenneth Walker was a man of strongly held beliefs for which he was willing to risk his career or forfeit his life. His years as a military aviator were concerned with bombers and the Air Force doctrine of strategic air warfare that dominated World War II.

Walker earned his wings in November 1918. In the next decade, he served with and commanded bomber squadrons in this country and the Philippines before attending the Air Corps Tactical School in 1928-29. The Tactical School was the intellectual center of the Air Corps in those days. Walker was kept on as an instructor in bombardment.

He and other airpower pioneers--among them Donald Wilson, Harold George, Haywood "Possum" Hansell, and Laurence Kuter--developed analytical systems for determining the key elements that sustained an industrial society and that were vulnerable to bombing. They concluded that a new era of warfare, in which an industrial country could be defeated primarily by strategic bombing, lay just over the horizon. It followed that a nation's air arm should be independent and co-equal with ground and sea forces. These ideas were heresy in the eyes of the War Department General Staff, which did not burn heretics but could make life unpleasant for them.

In 1934, Walker and four other Tactical School pioneers were invited to testify before the President's Commission on Federal Aviation (the Howell Commission) on the military aspects of aviation. The War Department tried by both direct and devious means to prevent their appearance in Washington, but the five officers decided to go at their own expense, though it probably would mean the end of their careers. World developments determined otherwise. All five became general officers, and their concept of airpower was proven correct.

On the eve of World War II, Walker, by then a lieutenant colonel, was assigned to the War Plans Division of the Army Air Forces staff.

Under the direction of George, Hansell, Kuter, and Walker formed the task force that wrote AWPD-1, the plan for organizing, equipping, deploying, and employing the AAF to defeat Germany and Japan should we become involved in the war that was engulfing Europe and the Far East. It was a monumental achievement, completed in less than a month. Then Japan attacked Pearl Harbor and the US was, in fact, at war.

Walker had missed World War I. He did not intend to sit out World War II in Washington. Six months after Pearl Harbor, he was promoted to brigadier general and went to the Pacific, where Gen. George Kenney made him

commander of the Fifth Air Force Bomber Command. Walker had precious little to work with in the fall of 1942--some 30 operational B-17s and about a hundred light and medium bombers.

Walker championed leadership by example as ardently as he was devoted to bombardment. He believed he should share the dangers of combat with his crews. Perhaps more important to him, Walker judged that he could not help develop tactics for that theater without personal experience in combat.

Early on, he was awarded the Silver Star. He went several times to Rabaul, the hottest target in the theater. He came back from one mission with six feet of wing missing and from others with battle damage. Kenney worried about his bomber commander, who was privy to much highly classified information, flying over enemy-held territory. In December, he ordered Walker to fly no more combat missions.

On Jan. 5, 1943, contrary to Kenney's order, Walker led 12 heavy bombers in a daylight attack on shipping in the harbor at Rabaul. The formation was intercepted by enemy fighters but put its bombs on target. One bomber was shot down. Walker's plane was last seen leaving the target with one engine burning and enemy fighters on its tail. A search failed to find any wreckage or survivors.

On the recommendations of Generals MacArthur and Kenney, Brig. Gen. Kenneth Walker was awarded the Medal of Honor posthumously. President Roosevelt presented the medal to Walker's son in a White House ceremony on March 25, 1943. The Air Force had lost one of its most brilliant officers, who lived with the conviction that bombardment had changed the nature of warfare and that a "well-planned and well-conducted bombardment attack ... cannot be stopped."