Kenneth N. Walker
Airpower's Untempered Crusader

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Editor’s Note

We are indebted to Martha Byrd for conducting the difficult and exhaustive research necessary to pull together the numerous parts that comprised the life and legend of Kenneth Newton Walker. That Walker had significant influence in the early days of airpower’s rise to prominence cannot be questioned. Ms. Byrd has brought us the man behind the influence. We also thank Martha Byrd’s husband, Jerry A. Roberts, for providing the information contained in “About the Author.”

Since Ms. Byrd, died before she could write an introduction to this biography, we asked David R. Mets, Lt Col, USAF (retired), to write one on her behalf. We are deeply indebted to him for the excellent introduction you see here.

We must also extend thanks to Douglas Walker, Kenneth and Marguerite Walker’s second son. He was professional, courteous, cooperative, and helpful at all times. He furnished the photographs used in this book, and any further use of these photographs requires his knowledge and approval.

PRESTON BRYANT
Editor
About the Author

Martha Byrd was born near Morganton, North Carolina, in 1930. She was educated in the Burke County and Morganton City school systems, and graduated from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1952. She later obtained a Master’s Degree from the University of Tennessee at Knoxville. Her written works include A World in Flames: A History of World War II (published by Athenaum in 1970 and reprinted by Smithmark in 1992), Saratoga: Turning Point of the American Revolution (published by Auerbach in 1973), Chennault: Giving Wings to the Tiger (published by University of Alabama Press in 1987), and numerous magazine and newspaper articles. Her one novel, A Shoebox of Violets, was published posthumously by Laney-Smith in 1995. Martha Byrd died of cancer in 1993.
Preface

The same traits of character that marked Kenneth N. Walker’s life led to his premature death. His most dominant characteristic, an inner drive that kept him at a fever pitch of intensity, was formed during a hard childhood. He joined the US Army in 1917 at age 19. Until 1928, his career was sound but unexceptional. He found his professional stride as a student at the Air Corps Tactical School in 1928-29, when he embraced the concept of the invincible bomber and made it his crusade. He served as bombardment instructor at the school from 1929 to 1934. Walker’s years at the Air Corps Tactical School were critical years in the development of US air doctrine. In that process—an intellectual process that had to be primarily theoretical because experience was so limited—Walker advocated bombardment as the means through which airpower in the future would be expressed. He did extensive work on bomber tactics and plane development, the goal of which was to make the bomber capable of defending itself as well as carrying out its offensive mission. Since he envisioned defense against an enemy’s air force being accomplished by bombers that would destroy the enemy’s planes and facilities on the ground, he saw little value for the pursuit (fighter) arm.

Although the phrase was first voiced by others, Walker became identified with the credo, “The well-organized, well-planned, and well-flown air force attack will constitute an offensive that cannot be stopped.” He believed it so fervently and advocated it so vehemently that his very conviction seemed to overcome the nagging doubts of others. Even his supporters agreed that he was “rabid” in his single-mindedness. Claire L. Chennault, his most vocal and visible opponent in the long debate on air doctrine, called him a radical with a blind spot. With limited technology, low appropriations, and an isolationist foreign policy also affecting decisions, the Air Corps moved inexorably toward a doctrine of strategic bombardment as the primary mission of an air force.

Walker’s intensity carried with it a marked arrogance and self-centeredness. Between 1934 and 1941, he advanced in his career
while his personal life fell apart. His first marriage ended in 1934; a second marriage lasted only a very short time. His close relationship with a third woman interfered with his efforts to become closer to his growing sons. When he left for the Southwest Pacific in 1942, he told a close friend that he had made a mess of things and might not be back.

Before leaving the States for combat duty, Walker made a further significant contribution to US airpower doctrine. Assigned to the Army’s Plans Division in Washington early in 1941, he became the first staff planner in the newly established Air War Plans Division. During the late summer and fall of 1941, he and several close associates—primarily Harold L. George, Haywood S. Hansell, and Laurence S. Kuter—put together the document known as AWPD-1. Ostensibly an outline of the planes and bases and men the United States needed for the war ahead, the document was significant in that it defined a formal role for US air forces. The thrust of that role was strategic bombardment, using high-altitude daylight precision attacks to destroy key segments of the enemy’s economy and capacity to wage war. The air forces would prepare the way for ground forces to invade, but the possibility was raised that the bombardment campaign might render the ground campaign unnecessary.

Brigadier General Walker arrived in Australia in August 1942 to lead the Fifth Bomber Command of Gen George C. Kenney’s new Fifth Air Force. At this time, the Japanese were aggressively advancing while the Allies struggled to get on their feet and fight back. For the Fifth Air Force, planes and men were in short supply, base conditions primitive, morale low, the battle terrain formidable and terrifying as well as largely unknown. Kenney, Walker, and Gen Ellis Whitehead set out to turn that around. The process required innovation and daring. Walker and Kenney soon clashed over tactics and procedures, for Walker viewed the circumstances as an opportunity to test the concepts he had spent his entire career in developing. Kenney’s background was strong in attack aviation as well as engineering; he had his own concepts to test. Walker supported some of them but not others. He defied Kenney’s orders on several occasions, but Kenney let the insubordination pass because of Walker’s value to the command.
Innovative tactics—plus guts and sacrifice—enabled the Allies to overcome the military crisis in the Southwest Pacific in late 1942 and early 1943. The Japanese advance through New Guinea was stopped, Allied forces seized the initiative, and the Guadalcanal campaign in the neighboring South Pacific began to turn in the Allies’ favor. At the end of 1942, Fifth Bomber Command was asked to blitz the main Japanese base at Rabaul, New Britain, where an unusually large concentration of enemy shipping had assembled. For what was planned as the largest bombing raid to date in the theater, Kenney ordered a night takeoff for a dawn strike.

Walker requested a morning takeoff for a noon strike. Kenney overruled him. Walker ignored Kenney’s orders. He also flew as an observer in one of the lead B-17s—a direct violation of Kenney’s orders that he stay out of combat. Walker’s plane was one of two lost in the raid. Neither his plane nor his body was ever found.

In the sense that he died at age 45, Walker’s was a career cut short. It is possible, however, that his place in history is stronger because he did not live to take part in the next phase of airpower’s doctrinal evolution. His contribution to doctrine was significant but flawed: the World War II experience exploded his assertion that the bomber would not need support from fighter aircraft. We can only speculate how Walker’s thinking might have changed during the course of the war. Stubbornness and pride might well have kept him from further growth. His strength, however, and the factor that earned him a respected place as one of airpower’s pioneers, lay in the surety of his conviction at a time when airpower was unproved and disorganized. An untempered crusader, General Kenneth N. Walker helped ensure that the United States entered World War II with a solid foundation for the effective application of airpower. With a strong bomber and sound bombardment tactics as its base, that foundation withstood the initial trials of combat and proved flexible enough to change with experience.
Introduction

The life of Kenneth Walker spanned most of the first half of this century. It was a time of enormous change everywhere—in some ways even greater than the changes we have seen in the last half. Before we move on to Martha Byrd’s examination of his life, we will here attempt to set Walker, the Air Corps Tactical School, the Army’s Air Corps, and the Army itself in the context of those times.

America and the World, 1898-1943

Walker was born at the very moment of one of the greatest turning points in American and world history. We recall that was the year of the Spanish-American War, which marked America’s transition from an agrarian, regional, Third World country to one of the world’s greatest powers. She simultaneously defeated the once-proud Spanish navy, passed most of the other great powers in the significant indices of industrial power, and maintained her status as the giant of the agricultural world. She was rapidly changing from a rural to an urban society, and her people were becoming ever more literate. Finally, she was receiving another huge wave of European immigrants, arguably the most daring and competent that the Old World had to offer.

But sweeping changes were occurring overseas as well. In Tsarist Russia, there were faint stirrings toward industrialization and even toward democracy. Farther west, Pax Britannica was entering its twilight. Industrialization was proceeding much more rapidly in Germany and Japan than in Russia. Both were beginning to build great navies that would one day threaten the hegemony of Britain at sea. Economic power and military power were beginning to migrate away from London—a process that would not be matured until shortly after Walker’s death, when only two great powers remained, situated out on the periphery of the Old World: Washington and Moscow. In the process, two world wars left the core of Western Civilization in economic and physical ruin. But that is only a part of the context of Walker’s life. He was never
stationed in Europe, and he spent the greater part of his life far to the west of the European core—far to the west of New York and Washington, in fact.

When Walker was born, the second great wave of Western imperialism had reached its peak. The European powers were completing the partition of huge portions of Africa and were attempting to do the same for China. They had previously acquired command of huge territories in the Asian subcontinent, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and the West Indies. That very year, the first great anticolonialist power to achieve independence (the United States) switched sides and entered the struggle in the company of the imperialists—albeit with considerable hesitation, to be sure. Almost by accident, America acquired Puerto Rico plus a sort of protectorate over Cuba. But even more worrisome for many anti-imperialists, America’s flag appeared for the first time in the Far East—in the Philippines. America was engaged in Asian politics as never before, and it was there that Walker’s life was to come to a premature end.

Cultural Change

Probably Kenneth Walker’s upbringing was more akin to that of the old America than the new. At the midpoint of his life (1920), the United States was said to have become more urban than rural. Too, the literacy rate continued its climb to near universality before he died. A huge portion of the draftees in Walker’s war had not graduated from high school, but much progress had been made in public education since the First World War. Walker was not a college graduate, in common with many officers and most of the populace. The great expansion of our universities was yet to come, but there had been substantial changes in the substance of higher education during the first half of the twentieth century. The utilitarian part of our higher education system had begun its growth during the Civil War, and it continued to march with the expansion of industry and the mechanization of American agriculture. The steam press yielded cheap newspapers, and the beginnings of both electronic media and motion pictures were reducing the cultural isolation of many of Walker’s countrymen—changes that were not yet found in most of the world. Also, the combination of
urbanization, the telephone, the automobile, the weakening of the churches, the beginning of the liberation of women, and other things, is said to have weakened the bonds of the traditional family. One result, it is further asserted, was that divorce became increasingly acceptable in American society—especially outside of the Army (though Billy Mitchell, Douglas MacArthur, and Benjamin Foulois all had divorces that seem not to have greatly inhibited their military prospects).

Perhaps most important was a profound change in the psychological outlook of a large part of the American elite. Up to the midpoint of Walker’s life, America had rarely encountered insoluble problems. She generally had a progressive and pragmatic frame of mind. Men of energy, intelligence, and goodwill could conquer any problem that came up. Such men could leave the Old World behind and build a New World where poverty and war would be a dim memory of ancient times. Diseases could be conquered with science and money. Poverty could be conquered with ingenuity, energy, and productivity. Wars could be eliminated through brotherhood and a common American heritage. But then came the horrors of World War I and its bloody stalemate in the trenches. It seemed that nothing worked anymore. The agony went on for years, and Americans were so repulsed that many of them thought war was the worst of all outcomes—anything that had the hope of evading that horror altogether, or bringing it to an end more quickly, would gain a receptive audience.

But the progressive American outlook received another profound shock in 1929. The great engine of our peace and prosperity broke down. And the great progressive, Herbert Hoover, an engineer and renowned humanitarian, seemed powerless to do anything about it. There was hunger in the land, and the old goodwill seemed spread too thin. Sigmund Freud had told us that the rational part of the mind does not drive us anyhow—that the dark corners of our subconscious were the real sources of our actions. The rules of logic could only work to give our decisions a veneer of Enlightenment rationality. The novels of John Steinbeck and other authors of the day gave further voice to this despondency—all this while the New Deal was using those who could find no work to build officers’ housing on Maxwell Field,
home of Kenneth Newton Walker and the Army’s Air Corps Tactical School. Those were the formative years of Walker’s professional career.

**Technological Change**

America was electrified and motorized during Kenneth Walker’s short life. The world of coal and steam was much diminished; the world of oil and electrical power was booming. When Walker went to war, the entire Navy was oil—powered. Coal trucks still rumbled on the streets of New York, as the great metropolis was still largely heated by coal, but it was universally lighted by electricity—and modern lighting had spread through great parts of the rural South and West. Instant communication had been available to high commanders through the telegraph in the Civil War and through primitive radio in World War I. During the last decade of Walker’s life, instant communication was spreading to more common folk through the telephone.

The transportation revolution had been under way for nearly a century when Walker was born, but it was still largely limited by terrain and the huge capital investments required for steamships and railroads. During his lifetime, the internal combustion engine released travelers from the bonds of rail and waterway. Large numbers of upper and middle class families (and some Army units) were motorized before World War II. This, too, reduced the cultural isolation of many Americans and changed personal mobility in ways that affected even the very structure of family life.

More importantly for Walker and his war, the internal combustion engine also made powered flight a practical proposition. He was only five years old when the Wright Brothers first flew at Kitty Hawk; when he died, experimental jets had already flown in Europe. This move into the third dimension was probably the most revolutionary technical change since the coming of gunpowder hundreds of years before. It was to have a profound effect on Walker’s life—and on war in general—because for the first time it became practical to contemplate striking directly at an
enemy’s vitals without first having to conquer his fielded defense forces.

**Economic Change**

There were huge changes in the world’s economy during Walker’s time. The multiple causes need not detain us long. Suffice to say, technology, natural resources, and war pushed it all along. London had been the financial center of the universe when Walker was born, and British industry was still strong though being overtaken by that of the United States, Germany, and Japan. By the time he died, the effect of World War I had caused New York to become the world’s financial capital. The Great Depression had come to Britain earlier, and its effects were more long—lasting there than elsewhere. As for the German and Japanese economies, the costs of war and bombing were temporarily rendering them helpless.

Welfare capitalism, social democracy, and communism had made enormous gains over laissez-faire capitalism in Walker’s time. In his America, big labor had reacted to the depredations of big business by creating huge unions. And the government had reacted by beginning to build an economic floor which was supposed to limit the fall of those at the lower end of the economic spectrum when times were bad. Notwithstanding taxes, unions, and other constraints, American industry grew to enormous proportions and continued the development of its mass production expertise. The great automobile, aviation, petroleum, and electronic industries were near the core of these developments. When Walker flew off to the Southwest Pacific, the United States was still largely independent of foreign sources of raw materials and food—a situation much envied by Germany and most other great powers.

**The Army and Its Airmen**

Though he was too junior to be much involved, during Walker’s early years in the Air Service and Air Corps he was witness to some grand bureaucratic battles characteristic of periods of military drawdown. It was not so much that the old horse soldiers depreciated the value of aviation, but rather that they had their own visions of the future. The real battle was over how this newly
important aviation was to be used, not whether it would be a major factor. In both Army and Navy, there was a powerful strand of thought that aviation could greatly enhance the power of the older forms of battle and that it had not yet proven an ability to have decisive effects independent of the ground and naval forces.

Many Army and Navy airmen disagreed, however. In the case of the Army, the fliers asserted that soon airpower would be able to bring about decisive political results without the necessity of first conquering the enemy’s army—and to do so quickly, thus reducing the total suffering. In the Navy, the airmen more gradually came to argue that the aircraft carrier would be the capital ship of the future with all the other units of the Navy existing to enhance its striking power. In their world, the argument was not settled until the midst of World War II.

In Walker’s world, the more vicious argument led to the court martial of Billy Mitchell. The outcome gave some lip service, at least, to the idea that greater development of military aviation was required. However, the related Morrow Board and, 10 years later, the Baker Board both concluded that there was no clear and present danger of any serious air attack against the continental United States—and both were right. From that it was concluded, with the dissent of Jimmy Doolittle in the latter case, that there was no call for an independent air force designed to achieve independent results in war. When Walker went to war, the US Army Air Forces had gained a good bit of autonomy within the Army, but it was still a part of the Army. Almost all of the strategic bombing advocates remained cautious enough not to claim that victory could unquestionably be achieved without the help of the Army and Navy.

It is worth noting that though Walker and almost all of his Air Corps cohorts forever complained that Army airpower was being starved, that was not entirely true. On the eve of World War II, it was shown that from 1926 to 1940 the research and development money granted to all the other combat branches of the Army amounted to only about 60 percent of that devoted to the Air Corps by itself. The Army had long ago folded its infant armor organization back into the infantry and its antitank guns were
absolutely primitive compared to those in Europe. In the National Defense Act of 1920, the Congress had cut Army manning to half of what had been recommended—and then only funded it to provide about half of that. After all, the “Great War” had been a war to end all wars. The point is, though, that if the Air Corps was undernourished, the rest of the Army was really starved. For all of that, though, the interwar Army was double the size of the one that had existed in 1914.

**Army Air and the Navy**

Mitchell was convicted, and he certainly was guilty as charged. Afterwards, the bureaucratic conflict between the airmen and the Army General Staff was held within more circumspect bounds, if only because of the Mitchell example and the fact that the General Staff could greatly influence the funds made available to aviation.

However, one of Mitchell’s main themes had been that navies were increasingly obsolete and that airpower could defend both coasts more effectively and at much lower costs than could navies. For the airmen, the Navy remained the principal bureaucratic enemy right up to Pearl Harbor—and afterwards they never tired of pointing out that Mitchell had accurately predicted the Japanese attack (and the Navy itself had practiced similar mock attacks on Pearl Harbor in the early thirties). Further, these feelings did not disappear with the coming of war, particularly among the forces deployed to the theater in which Walker died—the Pacific. For most of the prewar period, though, these bureaucratic struggles were fought out at levels far above that of Kenneth Walker. Mitchell himself from 1919 forward was a great boon to Adm William Moffett, head of naval aviation. Moffett was able to use the airman as a bogey to coerce the battleship admirals into releasing more money to naval aviation than they might have. His argument was that if the Navy did not pursue aviation development with vigor, then Mitchell would take it away from the sea service. By 1941, US naval aviation led the world in most of its functions and technologies. But though Walker himself was no more than an observer of those external battles, he was directly involved in a struggle within the air arm at the Air Corps Tactical School.
Bombers versus Fighters

Much has been made of the internal struggle at Maxwell Field in the early 1930s between fighter pilot Claire Chennault and a very few allies against what is usually painted as the majority conventional wisdom of the bomber barons. Equally usual is the implication that Chennault was right and the bomber people, including Kenneth Walker, were wrong—especially in the notion that the bomber could get through in daylight with acceptable losses to achieve decisive damage to vital targets.

During Walker’s younger years, in World War I, airplanes were at first used for reconnaissance and artillery spotting. This was one of the factors quickly leading to the stalemate in the trenches—the offensively minded general could never mass the required numerical superiority at the decisive point without his enemy finding out about it. Moreover, the spotting so enhanced the accuracy of artillery fire that the new fragmenting rounds were deadly against offensive troops necessarily out in the open. So the demand for command of the air first came from the ground generals. The airmen themselves were quick to take up air superiority as their first priority mission; it remains so still.

Mitchell came back from Europe in 1919 with the idea that air superiority was best achieved with pursuits (now called fighters) and that had to remain the priority mission—so, as I see it, the fighter units were the elite of the Air Service during Walker’s formative years. Meanwhile, the Italian general Giulio Douhet was arguing that air superiority could best be achieved by bombers through attacking enemy airpower while it was on the ground—in a world without radar, one could not find the enemy attackers in the big sky soon enough to stop them. As the decade of the 1920s wore on, the idea that the air battle would be a necessary part of the struggle for command of the air (Mitchell himself had seen some virtue in attacking airpower on the ground where possible) retained many supporters. But the Douhet-like idea increasingly gained ground, though he was seldom credited with influence.

From the First World War, airmen almost universally agreed that fighter escort would be a nice thing for bombers to have. However, they most usually doubted that it would be
technologically feasible to build a fighter with the tankage that would permit it to duplicate the range of the bomber and yet retain enough agility to tangle with enemy interceptors. The escort would necessarily be heavier and larger than the interceptor, which did not have to fly so far to get back to its base. Chennault himself was one of those who asserted the impracticality of the escort fighter. It is likely that the most avid bomber advocates, realizing that escort fighters were generally impractical (remember Iwo Jima), wished so much that the bombers could defend themselves that they persuaded themselves it was feasible. Many will disagree, I suppose, but I believe they were right—in the absence of radar, and it would have taken a miracle of foresight to predict the coming of radar in a world where the German army was still horse-drawn. I offer as support the record of F-117s in 1991 against an air defense system much more formidable than anything that could have been put up by the Germans and Japanese—the F-117s did indeed always get through and the most important reason was that radar had been factored out of the equation with stealth technology.

The point is that when Walker and his cohorts were arguing against Chennault at the Air Corps Tactical School in the early 1930s, radar was not a part of the equation. I leave it to the reader to judge whether he or any of the other bomber advocates should have been expected to predict the coming of radar so soon.

**Germany First**

One of the most important factors conditioning Walker’s war was the grand strategy of the alliance. Even before Pearl Harbor, the Americans and the British decided that Germany would have to be defeated first if war should come with all the members of the Axis. This guaranteed that the Pacific War in general would have a poor priority for manpower, equipment, and leadership. Moreover, though Adm Ernest King was partly responsible for that grand strategy, he did about everything he could to build up the Navy’s part of the war in the Central Pacific—and as Walker went to

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*Six thousand Marines died in taking the island, which was needed in large part for a base from which P-51s could escort B-29s to Japan.*
MacArthur’s part of the region in the Southwest Pacific Area, MacArthur’s part had to compete with Nimitz’s part for resources. Thus, MacArthur’s constant complaint on that issue had some foundation in reality.

**Walker’s War**

MacArthur’s war before Kenneth Walker’s arrival was almost an unbroken string of disasters. As Yamamoto had predicted, the Japanese ran wild for the first six months. After their great victory at Pearl Harbor, Nagumo and his carriers bashed Darwin, Australia, on the way to driving the British Navy out of the Indian Ocean. Meanwhile, though it took a while, MacArthur was driven out of the Philippines in humiliation. In the process, he fired his first air commander, Lewis Brereton, and replaced him with George Brett. MacArthur was no happier with Brett, who was sent on to other regions. The next replacement was George Kenney, who arrived in the summer of 1942—about the same time as Walker.

Kenney knew Walker well. They both had been on the faculty of the Air Corps Tactical School at the same time, with Kenney in charge of the “attack” (something like today’s “tactical”) part of the curriculum. Kenney was therefore fully cognizant of the strategic bombing theory even before he left, but later was the operations chief in the staff of Gen Frank Andrews’ General Headquarters Air Force (GHQ AF). The GHQ AF has been cited as a major step in the maturation of the American theory of strategic bombing and, organizationally, en route to an independent Air Force. Though Kenney and Walker had much in common, the latter was not Kenney’s leading lieutenant—that honor belonged to Enis Whitehead, who was doing the day-to-day leading of Kenney’s combat operations. Walker, by then a brigadier general, was Kenney’s bomber commander. He served as such during the initial six months of MacArthur’s campaign in New Guinea.

With that much as introduction, we shall now turn to Martha Byrd’s description of Kenneth Walker’s life and times. She was eminently qualified to carry out the task. Born while Walker was assigned to Langley Field, before the Air Corps Tactical School