

Giant in a Jug

Gen. George Kenney described Neel Kearby as short and slight, but in the air he was a giant among fighter pilots.

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ON JUNE 30, 1943, Lt. Col. Neel Kearby arrived in Australia with his 348th Fighter Group, the first P-47s assigned to the Southwest Pacific. His first question to Fifth Air Force Commander Lt. Gen. George Kenney was, "Who has shot down the most Japanese planes?" Kearby aimed to become the leading ace in the Pacific, but that goal would have to wait a while.

Almost no one except General Kenney and Kearby's boys thought the P-47 would do well in combat. Kenney surreptitiously arranged a mock combat between Kearby and an experienced P-38 group commander. Kearby won hands down, but the Jug could not be sent into action in that theater of vast open-water distances until its range was extended by drop tanks. General Kenney had them manufactured in Australia. The 348th was moved up to Port Moresby, New Guinea, but saw no combat until August 16, after the tanks arrived.

Neel Kearby scored his first two victories—a bomber and a fighter—on September 4, followed by a single eleven days later. Then, on October 11, came a combat that, up to that time, set him apart from all other American aces.

Kearby was leading a flight of four P-47s on a reconnaissance sweep in the Wewak area, about 450 miles northwest of Port Moresby. Shark-infested waters lay on one side and jungle on the other, peopled by enemy troops and natives of questionable appetite. In his flight were Capt. Bill Dunham, who ended the war with sixteen victories;

Capt. John T. Moore, a seven-victory ace; and Maj. Raymond Gallagher. Kearby sighted a Japanese fighter below them at about 20,000 feet. Diving on the Zeke from seven o'clock, Kearby fired at 1,500 feet, sending the enemy flaming into the sea.

Colonel Kearby took his flight back up to 26,000 feet. In the nearly cloudless sky below, the flight spotted twelve bombers at 5,000 feet escorted by thirty-six fighters. With the numerical odds only twelve to one—not bad in Kearby's estimation—he gave the signal to attack. In the space of a few seconds, Kearby shot down one Zeke and two Hamps while Dunham and Moore each got one Tony.

With the element of surprise gone, Kearby climbed to 20,000 feet, intending to call the flight together and head for home. Then he saw one of his P-47s below with two Tonys on its tail. Diving at 400 miles an hour, Kearby shot down both Tonys. Dunham and Moore, who had become separated from Kearby in the battle, saw him fighting six more Tonys, one of which Kearby probably downed. Unfortunately, his gun camera ran out of film after showing hits on the enemy fighter.

With six confirmed and one probable, an American record for a single engagement, Kearby assembled his flight and led them to an emergency field at Lae, where they landed with less than seventy-five gallons in their tanks.

Generals MacArthur and Kenney immediately recommended Kearby for the Medal of Honor. When it was presented by MacArthur early in January 1944, Kearby had nineteen confirmed victories and was tied with Dick Bong for the lead. Kenney advised Kearby not to get in a race with Bong, who was soon to return from leave in the States, but to be satisfied with one enemy plane in each engagement. Kearby agreed that that was good advice, but it



Neel Kearby—a fierce competitor.

didn't fit his goal of fifty victories before he went home.

When Bong returned a few days later, he ran his score up to twenty-one. Kearby, with two confirmed on January 9, again tied Bong, and there things stood until March 5, when Kearby, accompanied by Maj. Sam Blair and Dunham, decided to break the tie.

On the way to Wewak, always a good hunting ground, they picked up a formation of fifteen Japanese aircraft. Kearby got one on his first pass and then, against General Kenney's advice, climbed back to shoot down at least one more. This time, three enemy fighters latched on to his tail. Dunham and Blair each got one of Kearby's assailants, but the third put a burst into Kearby's cockpit from close range before Dunham blew him apart. Kearby's P-47 went straight into the jungle. There was no parachute.

As with several other great fighter pilots, the drive to excel that made Neel Kearby a leading ace of World War II was also his undoing. He was a superb pilot and shot, a great tactician, an outstanding combat leader, and a fierce competitor.

Eighteen months later, when the war ended, only three Pacific aces, all with many months of combat, had more kills than Neel Kearby had scored in six months. He lived on the razor's edge, but those months of eagerly sought combat left for the men who followed a spirit and a tradition that made victory in the Pacific inevitable. ■