

## A Texas World War II Ace: Neel E. Kearby

by Scott Sosebee

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(Jan 15, 2023) Each historical era has a nation that dominates either their region, or much of the world. While economic domination certainly goes a long way toward determining who is powerful and who is not, such domination is most often tied directly to military might, especially in the years before the late twentieth century. The Ancient Chinese Dynasties are prime examples in East and Central Asia, and then Greece and Rome in the ancient Western world; their armies and military expertise allowed them to build great empires. During the late eighteenth and much of the nineteenth centuries Great Britain was the world's "superpower," both economically and militarily, because their Royal Navy was the supreme martial power in the world. The twentieth century has often been called the "American Century" for precisely the same reason; the United States built a powerful economic and military machine that allowed it to become a dominant force.

Great Britain had become a power due to its navy. The United States' dominance was more varied, but a large portion of their power came because it dominated the air. In fact, air supremacy in this technological age is analogous to sea power in the nineteenth century as it has been said that "whoever controls the air controls the battlefield." That adage was never more accurate than during World War II, and especially during the war in the Pacific with Japan. Much of the credit for the eventual victory over Japan could go to that theater's fighter and bomber pilots, and one the most successful of those was 'Texas' Neel Earnest Kearby.

Born in Wichita Falls in 1911 to his M.D. father, John, and mother Bessie, Earnest Kearby grew up primarily in Mineral Wells before the family moved to Arlington when he was thirteen. After graduating high school Kearby went first to North Texas Agricultural College—now University of Texas-Arlington—but left school to find work after the Great Depression had financially devastated his family. After working for a packing plant in Dallas, Kearby saved enough money to continue his education at the University of Texas at Austin, where he graduated with a B.A. in Business Administration in 1937.

Immediately upon graduation Kearby joined the United States Army Air Corps. He went to flight training at San Antonio, which is where he met and married Virginia King Cochran. After graduation from flight school he was assigned to the 348th Fighter Group, and was a training officer. Kearby was a natural pilot, and he gained the reputation as not only a top-notch instructor, but also an excellent fighter tactician. He was responsible for many of the Air Corps' strategic methods and trained a good portion of the Corps' best fighter pilots. The Army rewarded his expertise and service, and when World War II broke, he out he was promoted to Colonel and made the commander of the 348th.

The Army assigned Colonel Kearby and his fighter group to the Southwest Pacific theater, where they would be part of the forces battling the Japanese over control of that area in advance of the campaign to take back The Philippines. Kearby and his pilots flew the famous and effective P-47 Thunderbolts, almost entirely in campaigns over New Guinea. Both his superiors and his troops described Kearby as an outstanding combat leader, and his expertise in developing combat tactics for those fighter planes was often cited as a "turning point" in the war. He was particularly instrumental in developing a plan of maneuvers that maximized the P-47's high-altitude capability and extraordinary diving speed, a huge advantage for the P-47, which was much larger than the enemy's fighter aircraft. Kearby was no "behind-the-lines" leader as he often led missions himself, and in all scored twenty-two aerial victories.

Kearby made his greatest accomplishment in October of 1943. He volunteered to lead a mission of four fighters to scout Japanese bases at Wewak, New Guinea. The group made a successful reconnaissance flight, but as they turned back for the return trip, Kearby saw a Japanese fighter below them. He immediately made a diving attack and shot it down, but then discovered that they were about to be in the middle of thirty-six Japanese Zeroes that were escorting twelve heavy bombers. Although the odds were decidedly against them and they were low on fuel, Kearby ordered an attack. The P-47s made a dive at the Japanese crafts. Kearby personally shot down three Japanese fighters on the initial run, and then shot down three more that were pursuing one of his fellow Americans. The group then made a daring escape into the clouds and safely made it back to base. In all, Kearby had made six "kills" in the engagement, the most ever for an American fighter in one battle at the time. For his heroics, he received the Congressional Medal of Honor.

Kearby received a promotion to a staff job following the successful fight, but he missed combat. So, he applied for a return to missions, and resumed such duties in early 1944. His return was brief and tragic. Kearby claimed his twenty-second "kill" over New Guinea on March 5, 1944. As he was leading his group back, Japanese anti-aircraft fire struck his plane and he crashed near Wewak, the scene of his greatest victory. His remains were not recovered until 1949, and he was then given a full honors burial at Hillcrest Memorial Cemetery in Dallas, where he joined his brother Major John Gallatin Kearby, III, who WWII also claimed.

During his career, in addition to the Medal of Honor, Kearby won five Air Medals, four Distinguished Flying Crosses, two Silver Stars, and the Purple Heart. Time called him “one of the great fighter pilots of World War II.” Today, you can still view an exhibit dedicated to him at the National Museum of the United States Air Force. He was a true American, and Texan, hero.

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