

## Unlikely Passengers

Contributed by Thomas Behrens  
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My dad, Al Behrens, served in the 822nd Squadron from mid 1943 to mid 1944. My curiosity became aroused upon reading the following entry from his diary:

January 7. Special courier mission. We flew General Akin, his aides and Dr. Compton around to Finschafen and Dobadura. He is a very nice congenial person and treated us very nicely. We stayed overnite at Dobadura.

I wanted to know more about these two men whom my father only knew briefly, and began to unravel the interesting story behind this special flight.

The physicist Dr. Karl T. Compton became president of Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1930, at the beginning of the Great Depression in America, at a time when science and technology were under attack. He served as president of MIT until 1948 and was instrumental in bringing together the disciplines of science and engineering education. In his tenure at MIT, he pioneered many revolutionary educational methods, the influence of which was found throughout the academic community. Dr. Compton became a member of the National Defense Research Committee (NDRC) created in 1940, and in this capacity was primarily responsible for assembling a group of academic and industrial engineers and scientists that would study RADAR, fire control, and thermal radiation.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff chose Dr. Compton to chair an ad hoc Committee on Radar Research and Development in order to step up development of radar for the United States military. A similar group had also been formed in the United Kingdom, but was more tightly coupled to their war department. At Dr. Compton's initiative, he traveled to Great Britain to meet with the minister of aircraft production, Sir Stafford Cripps, to discuss technical standards development, strategic application planning, and production goals for radar sets between the two countries.

In early 1945, Dr. Compton was selected as one of eight members of the Interim Committee appointed to advise President Harry S. Truman on the use of the atomic bomb. This Interim Committee was the forerunner to the Atomic Energy Commission which regulates the use of atomic energy in the United States. Karl's brother, Arthur H. Compton (1892-1962) who received his Ph.D. in 1916, took a leading part in the development of the atomic bomb and was the 1927 Nobel Prize winner in physics.

The purpose of Dr. Compton's trip was easily misunderstood, based upon his brother's close association with the development of the atomic bomb. Norb Weldon, my father's co-pilot, recalled the rumors about how the famous physicist was in New Guinea looking for geographical areas that might hold promise for mining nuclear raw materials. It appears, however, that his mission was not of such a high profile, but rather to examine first hand the use of scientific devices in the field of battle. He also took note of the incidence of malaria in the field, reporting that Americans appeared to be more resilient than the Japanese against this disease.

In MIT's student newspaper an article published shortly after his return explained that Dr. Compton "studied at first hand the application of important scientific developments to active war operations on land and sea." The article goes on to say that "President Compton said he was "tremendously impressed" by the esprit de corps of the men he met in Australia and New Guinea. They know exactly what they want to do, how they intend to do it, and how the war is to be won. Adequate transportation is the only limitation to a faster advance, but this handicap is rapidly being overcome."

January 8. Flew the General to Goodenough Islands and then to Port Moresby. Our outfit had just returned from a mission. Lost one ship.

In the fourth quarter of 1943, a special group, known as Alamo Task Force, had been assembled consisting of the U.S. Sixth Army, the U.S.A. Services of Supply, and the 14th Antiaircraft Command with a base of operations stationed at the forward echelon headquarters of the Sixth Army at Goodenough Island. A major initiative, code named Operation Dexterity took place from 15 December 1943 to 2 January 1944 to capture and occupy Cape Gloucester by way of Borgen Bay.

General Akin was the Chief of Signal Intelligence in the Far East and of Army forces in the Pacific and played a large part in distilling intelligence from Japanese radio transmissions used in the planning of Operation Dexterity. General Akin reported directly to General MacArthur and always maintained high visibility and control by being at the forefront of

operations. General Akin also maintained a close relationship with the Sixth Army as it fought across the Bismarck Archipelago, into New Guinea and finally liberating the Philippines in late 1944.

So now the connection between General Akin and Dr. Compton becomes very clear. As the tip of the signals intelligence spear, General Akin held answers to the many questions that Dr. Compton had about how the new technology was holding up in the hostile environment of the jungles in New Guinea. Later, in June of 1944, my dad recounts of a second encounter with the General:

June 4. Pete arrived today. Met General Akin again. He came down on a visit and we had a pleasant chat together. Went swimming in the afternoon. Tomorrow I go to have my teeth fixed.