



GENERAL HENRY H. ARNOLD EDUCATION GRANT

in honor of

LIEUTENANT GENERAL WILLIAM ELLSWORTH KEPNER



Lieutenant General William Kepner started his aviation career as a pioneer balloonist. His brilliant understanding and execution of tactical and strategic skills were honed during Tactical School where he studied among the class and faculty which included some of the Air Corps' best thinkers and future Air Force giants. His strafing and insistence of ever-increasing the range of fighter escorts during World War II earned him a place among the leaders in the development of warfare. At the age of fifty, General Kepner was still flying fighter missions over Germany - - leading by example. Kepner's leadership of the 8th Fighter Command was key in the destruction of the German Air Force.

William Kepner was born in Miami, Indiana in January 1893. In 1909, at sixteen years of age, he enlisted in the Marine Corps for four years. He left to complete his education. His National Guard unit was recalled in 1916 and was augmented into the Regular Army where he received an officer's commission. He was seriously wounded in World War I and decorated for individual heroism.

Kepner developed a passionate interest in flying and was solely disappointed when he received an assignment to balloon school instead of pilot training. Never the less, William Kepner excelled. He became a sport balloonist and won important National and International competitions on the Air Corps Balloon Team. Kepner's final balloon flight was aboard the EXPLORER I jointly sponsored by the National Geographic Society and the Army Air Corps. On this historic flight, the balloon reached a record 60,613 feet or nearly 11.5 miles. On descent, the balloon fabric deteriorated and the balloon, full of oxygen contaminated hydrogen, exploded with Kepner and crew parachuting to safety.

William Kepner finally received his coveted pilot wings in 1932, bringing his number of aeronautical ratings to six. Never one to turn down an experiment, he agreed to pilot an observation aircraft alongside Ira Eaker who undertook the first coast to coast flight on instruments only. General Kepner's selection to command 8th Fighter Command was in response to the heavy bomber losses suffered in the early part of World War II. With Kepner's innovations, fighter escort for the bombers increased in range from 175 miles to 850 miles. This was considered a turnabout of the air war. Kepner's last active duty assignment was as Commander-in-Chief of the unified Alaskan Command.

William Kepner's career spanned over forty years, three services and aviation progression from America's first tentative steps in aviation to jets. This was truly unique in the annuals of Air Force history.