



## Major John Gallatin Kearby III



John Gallatin Kearby III was born near the town of Wills Point, Texas, on December 21, 1905. The son of Dr. John Gallatin Kearby, Jr. and Bessie Kearby, he spent his early childhood in Comanche and Wichita Falls before graduating high school in Mineral Wells, Texas. During the

1924 and 1925 school years, he attended North Texas Agricultural College (NTAC) in Arlington, Texas. During his second year in school, his parents and younger brother, Neel Kearby, moved from Mineral Wells to Arlington where Dr. Kearby established a dental practice. (Almost five years later his brother attended NTAC, prior to winning fame in WWII as a fighter pilot and Medal of Honor recipient.)

While a student at NTAC, Kearby, known as "J.G." or "Gallatin," was a popular member of the Glee Club and the Corps of Cadets. After receiving an Associate's Degree in Electrical Engineering, he taught for two years in the public school system of Handley, Texas, while serving as president of the NTAC Alumni Association. In 1927 Kearby entered Southern Methodist University (SMU) in Dallas, and graduated in 1929 with a Bachelor of Science degree in Physics. He then taught part-time in the School of Engineering while attending graduate school at SMU, completing his course work and receiving a Master of Science Degree in Physics in 1931.

Thereafter he served for two years as head of the science department at Peacock Military School in Dallas, followed by employment stints with Standard Laboratories and Geophysical Service, Inc., occasionally working on assignments in South America. During the late 1930s he became a member of the Society of Petroleum Engineers and part owner and editor of *Drilling*, a technical publication.

With America on the verge of war in late 1941, Kearby, then 36 years old and married, voluntarily joined the Army Air Forces. Assigned to the Materiel Command Division at Wright Field in Ohio, he became the project manager of Project MX-117, a highly classified program designed to develop experimental high-altitude pressure suits. With formidable scientific skills and a reputation as an "inventive genius," Kearby distinguished himself as an "intense and dedicated" leader willing to risk his life in high-altitude experiments.

One of his most significant accomplishments occurred on October 2, 1942, at the Aero Medical Laboratory at Wright Field, when he ascended to a simulated altitude of 60,200 feet in an altitude chamber, a new record at that time. Unfortunately, his promising career ended tragically in a plane crash in Charlevoix, Michigan on August 2, 1943. At the time of his death, according to one source, he was "engaged in experimental work on navigational instruments."

Kearby's premature death had an adverse effect on the development of the pressure suit program as noted by C.G. Sweeting, author of *Combat Flying Equipment*, who wrote, "Major John G. Kearby, the dynamic project engineer, was killed while...returning to Wright Field after completing flight tests of an altitude suit. He was the first AAF officer to test a pressure suit in the altitude chamber and in actual flight...He personally conducted extensive flight tests of several suits...running risks which endangered his life." Kearby's death, Sweeting said, "not only brought on a premature end to the promising career of this talented and dedicated officer, but also had an adverse impact on the future of the full pressure suit program in the AAF."

Military historians have duly acknowledged Major Kearby's important role in the early development of the pressure suit. Among other forms of recognition, Kearby received mention in *Time* magazine (July 2, 1945) for his work in developing the "Strato-Suit," the forerunner of

today's space suit. His record-setting accomplishment in the altitude chamber is described in U.S. Air Force: a Complete History, published by the Air Force Historical Society. Posthumously awarded the **Distinguished Flying Cross** for his daring and fortitude, Major Kearby was buried with full military honors in Hillcrest Memorial Park cemetery in Dallas, Texas. His daughter, Dr. Norma Lou Kearby, of New Mexico, survives him.