

Kelly Field,

My introduction to a life-long association with flight and the Air Force



By Keith Ferris

A lineup of Curtiss P-1Ds on the “ramp” at Kelly Field, Texas. (All photos from the author’s collection)

[Noted aviation artist Keith Ferris shares an interesting perspective of what it was like growing up on an Army Air Corps base, Kelly Field, in the early 1930s. This article is a chapter from a book in progress that hopefully will soon be available.]

It is difficult to remember exactly when I first became aware of my surroundings.

I do remember beginning to realize that my life was governed by a recurring particular sound and smell that came with dawn’s light. I was being awakened to the regular sound of inertia starters winding up before sunrise as the D-12 engines of 24 Curtiss P-1Ds were turned over, each hand-cranked to life by a crew chief responsible for readying his airplane for its daily work. The closest of these airplanes resided literally 100 feet across the street from my bedroom window. The smell of the air I breathed was that of the flight line . . . that of gasoline, motor oil and airplane dope. The Curtiss P-1s were soon replaced with Boeing P-12Bs with their nine-cylinder Pratt & Whitney Wasp radial engines, each cylinder having its own six-inch exhaust stack. These P-12s put on a real show in the dark each morning as starters wound up, increasing its whining pitch until, once engaged, individual cylinders would cough, catch and emit a cloud of white smoke to be blown away as each of the nine cylinders came to life. Viewed from the rear in the darkness, counter-rotating blue flashes of exhausts could be seen revealing ignition sequence.

The Ferris family had disembarked from the Army Transport Service *USAT Cambria* in San Francisco on October 1, 1929, visited parents and friends in San Diego on a short leave, and then driven their newly purchased Model A Ford across the desert to Arizona, New Mexico and on to San Antonio, Texas. Here my Dad, 2nd Lt. Lisle Ferris, attended the one-month Air

Corps Instructor Pilot School at Duncan Field before being assigned once more to Kelly Field as an instructor pilot in the Air Corps Advanced Flying School.

Kelly Field’s large triangular grass flying field was located on the southwestern outskirts of San Antonio. It was bordered on its northern edge with 24 white WWI wooden airplane hangars identical to those Ferris knew at Luke Field only four years earlier. The hangars, facing each other, lay in a line from east to west with a gap in the center being home to the field’s Operations Building. The eastern hangars held the aircraft of the 43rd Pursuit Squadron (the school’s Pursuit Section), while the hangars to the west held the aircraft of the 40th Attack Squadron (the Attack Section) and the 39th and 41st Observation Squadrons (Observation Section). The two larger black hangars lying north to south at the west end of the field were home for the 42nd Bombardment Squadron’s Keystone bombers (the Bombardment Section).

The main line of hangars was fronted by a broad crushed stone road on the airfield side and a paved main street on the north side for its entire length. The entire post was only a single block deep with a perimeter road and a rail line separating the post from the farm fields to the north. Between the main street and the perimeter road lay enlisted barracks, cadet barracks, married officer’s quarters, bachelor officer’s quarters, squadron offices, headquarters and school buildings, medical facilities, a parachute loft, shops, academics buildings, water tower, and maintenance buildings. Two smaller engineering hangars lay at the east end of the hangars.

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Our quarters were on the main street facing the gap between the last pursuit hangar and the Visiting Ship hangar next to the operations building where the shadow is crossing in the photo.

The quarters were subdivided classic WWI barracks sheathed inside with gray painted narrow tongue and grooved wood strips normally used in the construction of early railroad box cars. Like most junior officers' families in those days, we relied on government issued Quartermaster Corps furniture. My earliest memories are of those bare walls, the single light bulb hanging from the ceiling in the center of my bedroom, and that distinctive cream-colored metal bunk identified by its Quarter Master Corps emblem suspended on the center of three vertical tubular supports of the iron headboard. There were striped cotton duck ticking mattresses and pillows and government-issued sheets, blankets and quilts. As we children grew older, each of us received our own footlocker in which our belongings were to be kept. Our quarters faced the main street



By November 1930, our little family had grown to include identical twin "soosers", Joanne and Jeanne, seen here with Visiting Ship hangar and Operations Building visible across the street.

while behind us, two similar converted barracks ran north to south, separated by a grass courtyard opening to the perimeter road and the tracks. Rear entrances opened onto common covered porches linking neighbors, while north-south streets at either side of the quarters separated us from cadet barracks to the east and two sets of senior officers' quarters to the west.

This "little world" was governed by bugle. Sunrise was greeted with *Reveille* awakening the troops for morning roll call and raising of the national colors. *Mess Call* signaled lunch time. The startling report of the retreat gun at sundown was followed by the sound of *Retreat*. Everyone was to stop immediately, get out of cars, and face the direction of the colors as the flag was being lowered to the sound of *To the Colors* played by bugle or the *National Anthem* if available by recording or band. The day ended with *Taps*.



These buildings and the fascinating airplanes across the main street to the south made up the entirety of our little world.



In front of the flight-line operations building.



The O-2H was one of the last airplanes Dad was to fly with the WWI Liberty Engine. These airplanes were real work horses at Kelly.



Dad was soon joined at Kelly by Burt Hovey, Frank Robinson, Nellie Morgan, Curley Lawson, Al Boyd, George Price, Russ Keiler, Joe Cannon, Lester Maitland, Wilfred Hardy and other old friends. Kelly instructors rotated assignments instructing students in the cadet specializations of Pursuit, Observation, Attack and Bombardment. Dad was to instruct in the Douglas O-2H in the Observation Section from December 1929 to October 1931, in the Pursuit Section Curtiss P-1D, October 1931 to November 1932, the Boeing P-12B, November 1932 to September 1933, the Keystone LB-7 and B-5A in the Bombardment Section until January 1934 and once more for Observation in the Thomas Morse O-19A and Douglas O-25A, while serving as Commandant of Cadets until August 1935.

Curriculum in the Observation Section was similar to that Dad experienced in "Advanced" training in 1926. This included flying with students from dawn and dusk, practicing aerial photography, reconnaissance and working with the ground troops at Fort Sam on practical problems using radio to adjust fire for artillery.

Leadership and instructors in the Observation Section Included Captain Howard Ramey, Lieutenants Gus Shea, Al Boyd, J.F. Haney, H.A. Moore, G.A. McHenry and Lisle Ferris.

The cadets knew me as "Keito." When they had asked my name I had yet to master putting the "th" in "Keith" together with the "F" in "Ferris," so my name was understood phonetically as "Key-Towess." The result was to be forever known by friends and family as "Keito".

Bell was a student of Lt. Haney when I was three years old, and was to graduate in the observation class July 1932. I was introduced to my first detailed scale model aircraft built by these and other cadets in those barracks. I was impressed with the detail and perfection of these models and the fact that one could actually build such models. I believe it was the teenage sons of Director of Pursuit, Lt. Dale Gaffney, in the senior officers' quarters to our west who were also model builders. I could not wait until I was old enough to build those models myself so when they weren't looking I brought home with me a little carved wooden model of the new Boeing P-26. When my Dad discovered this I was lectured about theft, right and wrong, ordered to return the little model to the Gaffney sons, tell them what I had done and apologize.

In May 1933 aircraft having participated in the Air Corps anti-aircraft exercises at Fort Knox, Ky., visited Kelly Field en route to their home stations. I could not resist a look at them, visiting the flight line alone for the first time.



Bay Sergeant Jasper Bell and Jesse Neal are the two cadets seen with me next to the cadet barracks.

Once we were old enough for extended walks, our favorite event each week was our Sunday morning walk with Dad on the flight line. Walking out onto the crushed gravel road fronting the hangars, we would walk west past pursuit ships, visiting ships, observation and attack aircraft not hidden behind closed hangar doors. This was a real learning experience as we were taught not to step on fabric covered aircraft surfaces, to stay on the black sand paper-like walkways. We learned never to walk in the plane of the propeller... at any time... EVER! (whether the airplane is occupied or not). We were to treat propellers as if a loaded gun. "They can kill with the turn of a mag switch." As we got older, we visited the big Keystone bombers at the far west end of the hangar line. These were our favorites. They were like giant "Jungle Gyms."

I was soon visiting transient aircraft in front of the Visiting Ship hangar across the street from our quarters asking the crews what type of aircraft they were flying and where they were based. A favorite was the huge olive drab and yellow Bellanca C-27. These airplanes were used to deliver personnel, engines and parts from depot to base and base to base.

It was at about this period when I began to describe aircraft to my Dad that had visited while he was off flying with his students. I soon found that it was easier to draw the visiting aircraft than to explain them in words. This was the first indication that I had interest and skills in that direction. Drawing or not, I never really wavered from wanting to fly these airplanes like my Dad when I grew up.

We were in the midst of the Great Depression and, in spite of the nation's economic devastation, the Air Corps continued to function . . . be it on a shoe-string. Military family budgets did not leave much for personal recreation, so camping trips with squadron families became a popular weekend pastime.

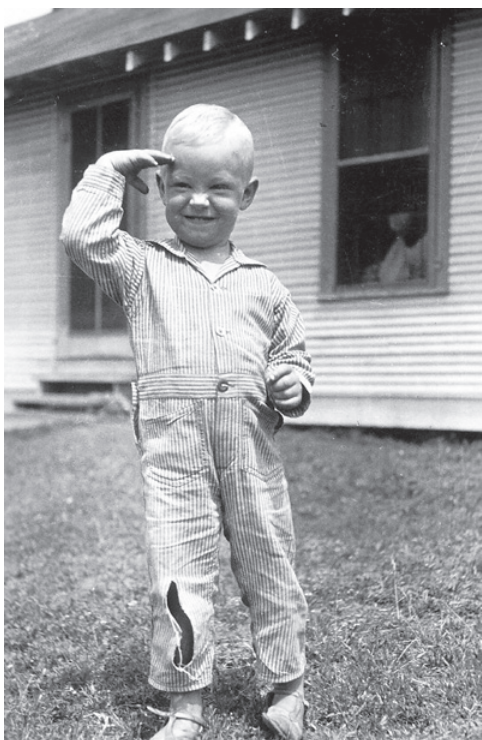
Back in 1926, while flying for the movie *Wings* and awaiting his Hawaii assignment, Dad had been asked by Flight Surgeon Guy Griggs to fly him up to his hunting and fishing location on the Guadeloupe River a little east of Boerne, Texas. He had strapped the Doc's footlocker full of camping gear to the lower left wing of a DH and delivered him into a small curved grass/weed-covered field next to a bend in the river. On picking him up a week later, Dad asked the Doc to stand in the back seat and guide him by tapping his left or right shoulder. He had begun his "curved" takeoff run through the high grass following the tap, tap, tap instructions on his right shoulder when close to flying speed, he suddenly felt frantic tapping on both shoulders. A look over the side revealed an abandoned hay rake concealed in the brush directly in his path.



I am seen with a Douglas Y1B-7 of the 31st Bomb Squadron, 7th Bomb Group, put to bed on its way home to March Field. The photo was taken by the cadet who brought me home about two weeks past my fourth birthday.



Above & Below: I was soon visiting transient aircraft in front of the Visiting Ship hangar across the street from our quarters asking the crews what type of aircraft they were flying and where they were based. A favorite was the huge olive drab and yellow Bellanca C-27 (Below). These airplanes were used to deliver personnel, engines and parts from depot to base and base to base.



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Above: Military family budgets did not leave much for personal recreation, so camping trips with squadron families became a popular weekend pastime.



As our “new” P-12Bs replaced the old P-1s across the street, these new-comers were to cement my love of airplanes. I was to live among these wonderful Boeings until we left Kelly for the Air Corps Tactical School three years later.

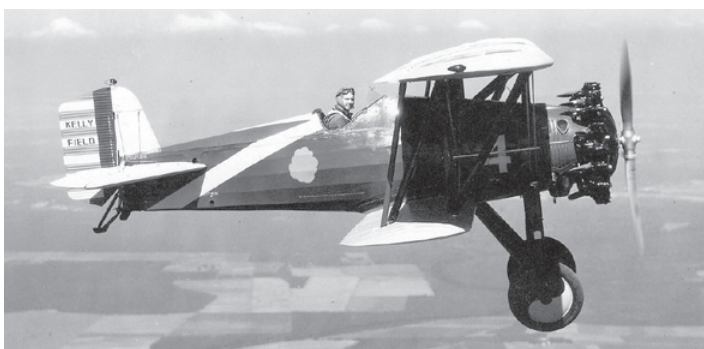
He had just enough speed to hurdle the hay rake, touch down once and bounce airborne barely clearing a barbed wire fence.

The Doc had subsequently retired in the Boerne area and it was here along his old fishing segment of the Guadeloupe River that the 43rd Pursuit Squadron families would camp, making the Griggs and neighboring farmers and ranchers part of the 43rd Pursuit Squadron Family.,

The kids’ primary duties were the collection of firewood for the cooking of meals. We were taught to gather only hardwood as appropriate for cooking purposes. In that area, hardwoods were almost exclusively live-oak with their ample supply of downed branches beneath the trees. To this day I use the downed dried limbs found beneath oak trees rather than charcoal for our outdoor cooking.

These were Prohibition years and the rural population near this camping location provided readily available home-distilled alcohol. I can remember the adults singing long into those evenings songs recognized today as of the aviators’ “Stag Bar” variety. These shared experiences led to lifelong friendships among our military families. We kids were soon to learn that we really did not lose our friends on our parents’ receipt of orders for subsequent assignments. Distance did not end our friendships. Given the small size of the service, we would most likely be serving together again.

Aircraft in front-line squadrons were regularly replaced as later models became available. After scheduled depot maintenance certain of these were re-assigned to Kelly field to replace aging aircraft in the school. April 5, 1932, found Lieutenants Ferris, Underhill and Baxter picking up three refurbished former Selfridge 94th Pursuit Squadron P-12Bs

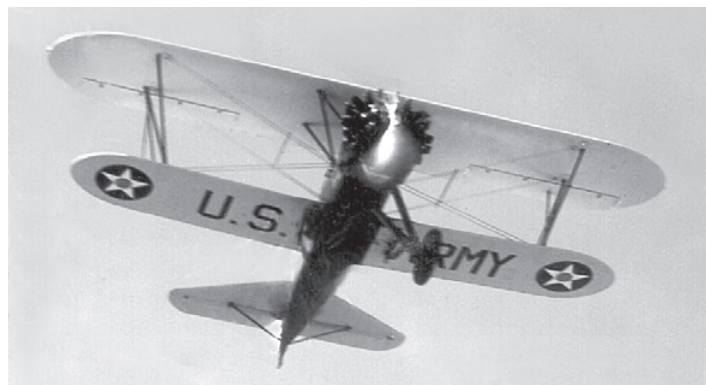


The Boeing P-12B, here flown by instructor “Curley” Lawson, was just under 20 feet long, and had a 30 foot upper wingspan.

from the Rockwell Air Depot in San Diego, California. After refueling stops at Davis-Monthan Field at Tucson and Biggs Field at El Paso, they arrived at Kelly on April 6 after 8 hour and 40 minutes flight time. Four more P-12Bs were delivered from Mather Field, Calif., by Kelly Instructors arriving on April 8. The Pursuit Section had its full complement of 24 P-12Bs by July 27.

The Boeing P-12B was just under 20 feet long, and had a 30 foot upper wingspan. The wings were of fabric covered wooden construction, while the fuselage was of bolted square aluminum tubing, fabric covered aft and aluminum covered forward. Its control surfaces were unique pressure-stamped corrugated aluminum. The P-12B was powered by a 450-hp Pratt & Whitney SR-1340C Wasp equipped with a nine-foot ground-adjustable Hamilton Standard propellor. The P-12 could withstand between nine and 12 Gs positive. With increasing power reaching 600 hp for the P-12F, the same as the later North American AT-6, each model increased in weight and suffered as a result. Many pilots, including my Dad, claimed the P-12B to be the finest of the P-12 family. Dad said that the P-12B was the most fun to fly of his entire 30-year career.

Aircraft of those days were designed to be operated from large unobstructed grass areas, always taking off and landing into the wind whatever its direction. This meant that, when the wind was from the north at Kelly our P-12s took off directly over us, barely clearing the hangars. Conversely, with the wind



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from the south, the P-12s dragged in over our heads and the hangars, landing as close to them as possible to shorten their taxi back to the flightline.

Having watched his brother-in-law's flying adventures since 1925, our mother's brother, Eugene A. Brecht, our Uncle Dean, enlisted as an aviation cadet as soon as he could, graduating with one of the final primary flight school classes at March Field in 1931. Dean joined us at Kelly for advanced flying training in Pursuit with Burt Hovey as his instructor.

Dean graduated from Kelly as a pursuit pilot in March 1932. Commissioned a 2nd lieutenant in the Air Corps Reserve, his first assignment was to the 6th Pursuit Squadron at Wheeler Field next to Schofield Barracks north of Luke Field on Ford Island in Honolulu, Hawaii.

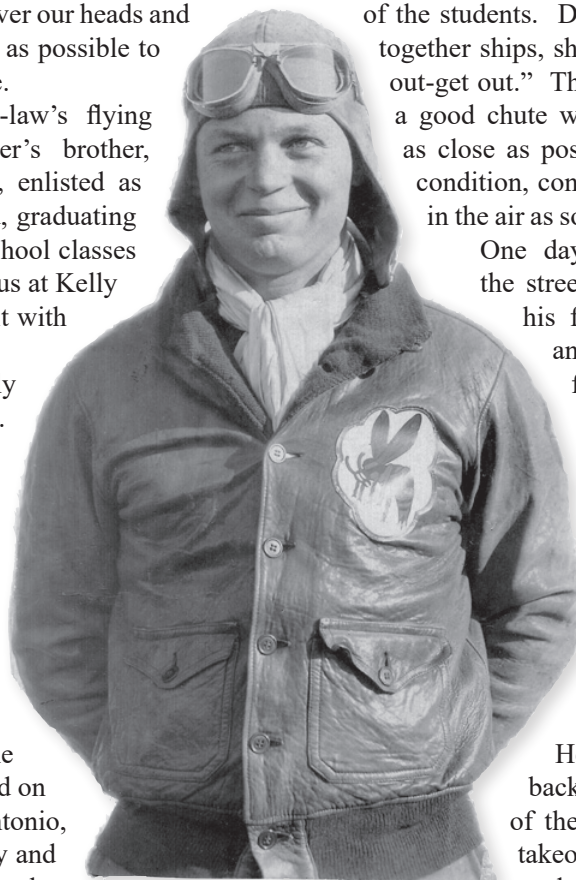
Dad loved training cadets and student officers to fly the P-12. When students came over to Kelly from the new Training Center at Randolph Field on the northeast of outskirts of San Antonio, where they had received their primary and basic flight training, they had yet to be exposed to single-seat pursuits with their more powerful engines. The first week in the syllabus concentrated on takeoffs and landings. The instructor was now to deal with five students separately, brief them on the airplanes' characteristics, then fly with each, more or less as a chase aircraft, exactly as he had previously done with the P-1s.

The Pursuit Section was in its second week of the syllabus that called for formation training and strange field landings. Formations in these early aircraft required wingmen to swap sides in cross-over turns that proved to be very dangerous. A couple of Dad's students had collided in this maneuver on one training mission, resulting in the loss of two aircraft and one

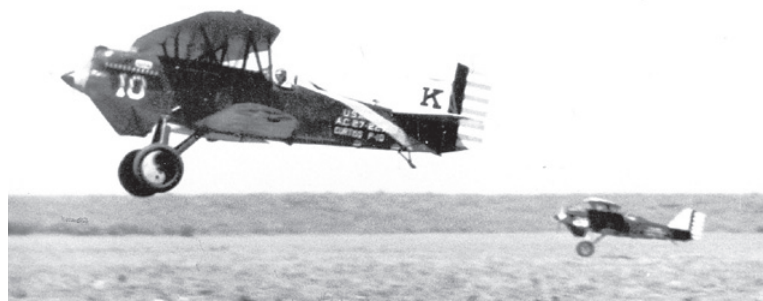
of the students. Dad had circled the descending locked-together ships, shouting at the surviving student to "get out-get out." The student, escaping the wreckage with a good chute was followed down where Dad landed as close as possible to the student. He checked his condition, consoled him and made sure he was back in the air as soon as they could get him back to Kelly.

One day my Dad came home from across the street for lunch, his left hand and side of his face bleeding. He explained that he and two students had been practicing formation flying. He, as the instructor, was constantly on watch for suitable fields below for forced landing practice. With several in sight, he would wag his wings and give the students the cut signal across the throat. The students would chop the power, search terrain below for suitable fields, looking for obstacles, ditches, fences and establishing wind direction and select a safe landing spot.

He had landed behind the students, taxied back to the approach end and into the corner of the fenced field. Awaiting the student's takeoff Dad noticed his hand was bleeding and that he had blood on his face. He turned to find a very angry farmer firing at him with a shotgun (see painting next page).



Uncle Dean Brecht as 43rd Pursuit Squadron Cadet.



P-1 Instructor and student taking off to the south. The site on top of that ridge beyond was to become the new Aviation Cadet Center in 1941, later known as Lackland AFB.



Dad loved training cadets and student officers to fly the P-12.



The Pursuit Section was in its second week of the syllabus that called for Formation Training and Strange Field Landings.



My painting "Farmers' Nightmare", created almost sixty years later, records this memorable event. The viewer is standing on the spot from which the farmer was firing. During that second week in the syllabus, not only were all of Kelly's P-12s fanned out across Texas from San Antonio, but the Observation, Attack and Bombardment sections of the Advanced Flying School were going through this same process. That practice did not last much longer for the government was liable for damage to crops suffered by farmers.

Those big Wasp engines, with their six-inch exhaust stacks, completely blocked out the sound of the shotgun as the students, concentrating on their takeoff, did not realize that their instructor was a trapped target. As the students departed and climbed away, the farmer kept up his fire. Climbing out, still under fire, Dad glanced above in time to see fellow instructor George Price give the signal for two more students to drop into this farmer's field.

After graduation from Kelly and stationing at Wheeler, Uncle Dean and his wife Shirley were to bring us two cousins Dutch and Sherry. In 1935, Dean, now a Regular Air Corps officer paid, us a visit in his newly assigned Selfridge 17th Pursuit Squadron Curtiss P-6E.

By this time I was in kindergarten being taught by a lady who was to become famous as the author of *Army Wife*. Nancy Brinton Shea was the wife of Observation Section Instructor



My two little sisters are shown visiting from nursery school while I am standing in the six o'clock position in shorts and boots behind our little class-built 43rd Squadron "P-12".



In 1935 Dean, now a Regular Air Corps officer paid us a visit in his newly assigned Selfridge 17th Pursuit Squadron Curtiss P-6E.



Mrs. Shea made sure each of us practiced what we today call "egress training."



May 1934 saw the family moving to new quarters.

August E. Shea. Gus and Nancy had courted while he was a West Point cadet and during his time as a student officer in flight training. Once graduated from Kelly, they married and Nancy was to become the nation's expert on the details and protocols of being an Army wife. Her book *Army Wife* served as the bible of service wives, eventually serving Army, Navy and later, Air Force wives as well. She was a very talented teacher and knew how to get and maintain the interest of her students. Our class was the "43rd Pursuit Squadron Kindergarten Class."

May 1934 brought our little brother Dean Brecht Ferris, named for our uncle Dean. This addition overtaxed our quarters facing the hangars and now as a family of six, we were moved into a double set of quarters to the side facing the cadet barracks. Two front yards were combined and fenced to hopefully contain us and our new Airedale "Ruff".

Two separate events at this time led to the discovery by the same duty flight surgeon that I had serious allergies to both egg protein and Tetanus anti-toxin then known as "Horse Serum." This was also the point at which Dad became Commandant of Cadets . . . the *Kaydet's Nightmare*.

August 1935 marked the end of the six year tour at Kelly. Dad was carrying forward a total of 2,881 hours of flying time to his new assignment as a student in the 1935-1936 class of the Air Corps Tactical School at Maxwell Field in Montgomery, Alabama.

We packed our few belongings into our footlockers, turned in our Quartermaster cots, our government issue bedding and furniture and packed our newly designed and built house trailer. The trailer, towed by our new DeSoto, was complete with red and green running lights to left and right, retrieved from wrecked Keystone bombers found in the bone yard at the end of the hangar line. We said goodbye to dear



Joanne, Keith, new brother Dean, "Ruff" and Jeanne.

old Kelly Field and headed for Montgomery, camping along the way. This was long before house trailers were common or camp grounds even existed. We simply selected attractive overnight stopping spots. We were to spend several wonderful days on the beach near the new Air Corps gunnery ranges at Valparaiso, Florida.

Signing in at Maxwell in early August 1935, we found that there would be a wait for quarters on post. Our family was to experience our first rental home off-post and, for the three of us older kids, our first civilian school. The rental home was located at then-numbered 500 Narrow Lane Road in Montgomery. The home rented for \$600 per year, \$50 payment due at the beginning of each month. There was agreement that, should "competent orders be received making further occupancy impractical, this lease shall terminate upon one month's notice."

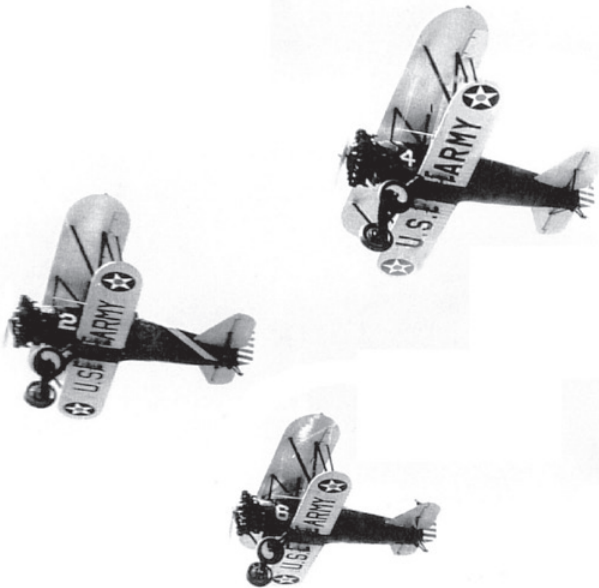
Quarters on post became available in early 1936. We transferred for the second half of our school year to my third school now on post. Attending three different schools during my first two years of school we kids were becoming experienced Army Brats. ➔

About the Author

2012 National Aviation Hall of Fame enshrinee Keith Ferris was born in 1929, the son of a career Air Force Officer. He grew up with military aviation, attended Texas A&M majoring in Aeronautical Engineering, George Washington University and Corcoran School of Art in Washington, D.C. He began his art career as a civilian in Air



Commandant of Cadets, Lt. Leslie Ferris "Kaydets' Nightmare".



The Graduation Review with Instructors leading students in their P-12Bs

Force Publications at Randolph Field in 1947. After five years with St. Louis art studio, Cassell Watkins Paul, under Air Force contract, Mr. Ferris became a freelance artist in the New York area in 1956 and a member of the Society of Illustrators in 1960. His art has served the advertising, editorial, public relations, and historical documentation needs of the aerospace industry, publications, the military services and air and space museums for 70 years.

Mr. Ferris created the 25 foot high by 75 foot wide mural in oil "Fortresses Under Fire" in the WWII Gallery of the National Air and Space Museum of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., and the 20 foot by 75 foot Evolution of Jet Aviation mural in the museum's Jet Aviation Gallery. Having participated in the United States Air Force Art Program for over 50 years while documenting the Air Force mission with art, Mr. Ferris has flown more than 300 hours in jet fighter aircraft and has flown in most all jet aircraft types in the Air Force inventory. He deployed across the Pacific to South East Asia as a civilian

back-seater with the first squadron of F-4E Phantoms in 1968 where he participated in missions of the F-4E, the F-105F and the B-52D. Ferris has spent a total of eight weeks over a 25-year period flying with the USAF Fighter Weapons Schools at Nellis AFB experiencing the employment of aircraft ranging from the F-100 to the F-15 and F-16.

Ferris holds five United States patents for deceptive aircraft paint systems. With 62 major paintings in the Air Force Art Collection, he is a founder and past president of the American Society of Aviation Artists and a Life Member of the Society of Illustrators having served on its board of directors as Air Force Art Chairman for 16 years and for two years as its Executive Vice President.

He was elected an honorary member of the United States Air Force Thunderbirds in 1969, an honorary life member of the Order of Daedalians, the national fraternity of military pilots in 1986, and in 1992 was inducted into the Aviation Hall of Fame of New Jersey. He received an honorary doctorate of Humane Letters from Daniel Webster College in Nashua, N.H., in 1995 for his years of documenting aviation history through art. Named to the *Aviation Week & Space Technology* Laureate Hall of Fame in the National Air & Space Museum for Lifetime Achievement in 2004 and is a member of the Society of Illustrators Hall of Fame in New York. In addition to enshrinement in the National Aviation Hall of Fame as "Dean of Aviation Art," he was a 2012 recipient of the National Aeronautic Association's Distinguished Statesman of Aviation Award. In 2014 he received the Honorary Aerospace Engineering Engineer Alumni Award from Texas A&M. In 2018 Keith received the Air Force Historical Foundation Major General J.B. Holley Award for his lifetime of documenting Air Force history. Keith proudly serves as an Emeritus Trustee of the Board of Trustees of the National Museum of the Mighty Eighth Air Force Museum.

MOVING

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