THE GENERAL WILLIAM C. LEE AIRBORNE MUSEUM

Commemorating

Major General William C. Lee
"Father of the Airborne"

209 West Divine Street
P.O. Box 1111
Dunn, North Carolina 28334
(919) 892-1947
William Carey Lee was born in Dunn on March 12, 1895. The son of a hardware store operator, Bill Lee was a typical hometown boy. He played baseball at Dunn High School where he graduated. He attended Wake Forest College from 1913-15 and there played varsity sports and was president of his sophomore class. He then transferred to N.C. State College to enroll in the ROTC.

In the spring of 1917, Bill Lee left N.C. State and joined the U.S. Army as a second lieutenant. He married the former Davie at Ft. Benning in 1922. From N.C. State in 1920 and from the U.S. Army's officer school, he spent the next months in Europe as an infantry platoon commander and company commander to earn the rank of captain. He graduated from N.C. State in 1920 and from the U.S. Army's officer school at Ft. Benning in 1922.

Following World War I, Bill Lee had various assignments. He taught military science at N.C. State, served in Panama, and in Washington, D.C. There he soon became well and widely known as the U.S. Army's foremost and staunchest advocate for formation of American airborne forces.

William T. Ryder, Brigadier General, U.S. Army, Retired:

In early 1940, when President Roosevelt personally directed the priority development of airborne forces, then Major Lee was assigned to organize the project.

In July 1940, under Major Lee's guidance, a Parachute Test Platoon commanded by then Lieutenant Ryder was formed at Ft. Benning, Georgia to test equipment, training methods and tactics developed for parachute troopers by the Army Infantry Board. Three months later the Army activated its first parachute battalion, the 501st, commanded by then Major Bud Miley.

In March 1941, now Lieutenant Colonel Lee was assigned to form and command a Provisional Parachute Group at Ft. Benning. Here under Lee's dynamic leadership and direction, three additional parachute battalions were activated and in place by October of that same year.

In March 1942, the Provisional Parachute Group was reconstituted as the Airborne Command under new Lieutenant Colonel Lee. Within the year, three parachute regiments were added to the Army's airborne forces and the Airborne Command headquarters relocated to Camp MacKall, North Carolina, with new Brigadier General Lee in command.

August 1942 saw activation of the Army's first airborne divisions, viz, the 82nd and the 101st. The recently promoted Major General Lee was put in command of the new 101st Airborne Division.

Major General Lee took his division to Camp Claiborne, Louisiana, for training. It was there during an inspiring address to his paratroopers that General Lee coined the phrase that was to become the epitome of the airborne spirit, "...This division has no history, but it has a rendezvous with destiny." After a year of training, General Lee and his paratroopers departed for England where they would keep their "rendezvous with destiny." Airborne's advancement from battalions to divisions and Lee's advancement from major to major general in a brief two year span attest to General Lee's successful and vital role in airborne development and truly earned him the sobriquet, "Father of the Airborne."

Major General William C. Lee

Maxwell D. Taylor, General, U.S. Army, Retired:

In my opinion, General Lee richly deserves the tribute you seek to give him. He was truly the "Father of American Airborne Troops" and was closely identified with airborne development from the beginning of the United States' interest in this form of warfare.

Bill's old division produced two four-star generals, five lieutenant generals, five major generals, and one brigadier general. I know of no comparable record.

A.C. McAuliffe, General, U.S. Army, Retired:

General Lee has been truly called the "Father of the Airborne." At an age considered too advanced for parachute jumping he organized and commanded the parachute school and trained our first parachutists. He jumped frequently himself, and by his great character and superior military knowledge set an example for airborne troopers which was reflected in their brilliant combat record during World War II.

The use of his airborne troops shortened the war in Europe and saved many lives.

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Bill Lee 1912

Capitant and Mrs. Lee 1921

General Lee was denied the chance to lead his men into battle when he suffered a heart attack on February 5, 1944. 0n October 2nd of the same year, he medically retired from the Army. During his retirement he served as the first airborne adviser to the United Nations. On June 25, 1948, General Lee died at the age of 53 after continued heart problems. Among the numerous dignitaries and scores of general officers who attended his funeral were General Anthony C. McAuliffe who commanded the 101st Airborne Division during the Battle of the Bulge, Lieutenant General James M. Gavin who commanded the 82nd Airborne Division during much of the European Campaign, and General Maxwell D. Taylor who commanded the 101st Airborne Division during the Normandy Invasion.

General Lee was awarded the Distinguished Service Medal in 1944, with the following citation: "For exceptionally meritorious and distinguished service rendered in a duty of great responsibility while organizing and establishing the airborne program which existed at the present time was instituted. General Lee was instrumental in the establishment of the parachute school, Fort Benning, Georgia, 15 May 1942. With meager facilities, a few partially trained instructors, and by exceptional ability, force of character, and the will to get the job done, General Lee built the framework for a powerful striking force. The creation of the Airborne Command was the first effort of the United States to train airborne units on a major scale."

Other Honors

In addition to the museum in Dunn, a few blocks from the museum an 8 foot tall marble statue of General Lee stands in front of the city hall. Also, a street in Dunn is named for him. Additionally, the airfield at Ft. Benning is named in his honor. Lee Village at Ft. Campbell bears his name as does the field house at Ft. Bragg. In Tokyo the 11th Airborne Division named a street "General Lee Avenue." The General's alma mater, N.C. State University, honors him with Lee Dormitory and by presenting the General Lee Military Scholarship to the outstanding ROTC cadet each year.
The General William C. Lee Memorial Commission, Inc.

Hoover Adams, President
Dr. Randolph Defformyres, Vice-President
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The Commission was established to present the accomplishments and perpetuate the memory of Major General William C. Lee, a native of Dunn, North Carolina, and foremost contributor to the development of U.S. Army Airborne concepts and organization. Primary functions of the Commission are the creation and maintenance of a commemorative museum and the presentation of ongoing ceremonial observances and festivals.

The General William C. Lee Airborne Museum is housed in General and Mrs. Lee's former home in Dunn. The beautiful three story brownstone house was built in 1903 and is listed in the National Register of Historic Places. The building was restored at a cost of over $500,000 by the commission and through continuing contributions from local, state and national groups and individuals. The museum was dedicated on June 6, 1986, with an address by Secretary of the Army, John O. Marsh.

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Museum Hours
Tuesday - Saturday 10AM - 4PM
Sunday 1PM - 5PM
Closed on Mondays, Thanksgiving Day and Christmas Day
Group tours during and after regular hours by appointment

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