

**Colonel Joseph W. Kittinger, Jr.
Inducted 2000**



Colonel Joseph W. Kittinger, Jr., was born in Orlando Florida in 1928. He began his aviation fascination at an early age, dreaming of flying while watching planes at the Orlando Municipal Airport. He was accepted in the USAF aviation school in 1949. He served in the Air Force for 28 years, retiring in 1978. His military career included a variety of assignments from Fighter Pilot to Experimental Test Pilot, to staff assignments to an F-4 Squadron Commander and Vice-Commander of an F-4 Fighter Wing. On 1 May 1972, during his third combat tour, he was shot down in aerial combat near Hanoi and was a POW there until his release in March 1973. He is also a Master Parachutist, has experienced five High Altitude Research Balloon Flights, and has extensive experience in low altitude helium and hot air balloons.

Colonel Kittinger is probably best known for his accomplishments as an early "space hero," a characterization which first appeared in the cover story of the 29 August 1960 issue of Life magazine. Kittinger participated in the pathbreaking stratospheric balloon programs of the late 1950s and early 1960s, Projects Man High and Excelsior, the latter of which tested a pilot's ability to survive an ejection from newer high-flying jet aircraft and set the stage for America's first manned spaceflight efforts in the following years. In collaboration with Colonel (Dr.) John Paul Stapp, himself a pioneer in space medicine, his high altitude balloon flights during Man High and his three remarkable Excelsior jumps also provided some of the earliest data on the effects of a near-space environment on the human body and mind. For Excelsior III on 16 August 1960, as an Air Force captain, Kittinger jumped from an open balloon gondola at 102,800 feet, the highest man had ever gone in an unpowered flight. He plummeted to earth, travelling 16 miles in 4 minutes and 36 seconds, before his main chute opened, which was the longest free-fall in history. Kittinger's jumps served many purposes in the United States' early space exploration, especially testing man's ability to survive high above the earth. He was quoted

as radioing back a frightening first hand view of space, "There is a hostile sky above me. Man may live in space, but he will never conquer it." In December 1962, under Project Star Gazer, Kittinger piloted a balloon into the upper atmosphere accompanied by a civilian astronomer to use a high-powered telescope to view regions of deep space never before seen unhindered by atmospheric distortions.

Kittinger still holds the record for the highest parachute jump and first man to exceed the sound barrier (714 mph) in free-fall, for the Excelsior III jump. He has the most high altitude balloon flights (five): Man High I (96,000 ft); Excelsior I (76,000 ft); Excelsior II (75,000 ft); Excelsior III (102,800 ft); and Stargazer (86,000 ft). He also holds several other balloon records including the Longest Distance flown in a 1,000 cubic meter helium balloon (2001 miles in 72 hours, in 1983), the Longest Distance flown in a 3,000 cubic meter helium balloon (3543 miles in 86 hours, in 1984), and the first person to fly solo across the Atlantic in a helium balloon (Maine to Italy in September 1984).

Colonel Kittinger's awards are significant and numerous. His military decorations include among many others the Distinguished Flying Cross for Project Man High and the Distinguished Flying Cross for Project Excelsior. His civilian decorations include the Harmon International Trophy (Aeronaut), the Aeronaut Leo Stevens Parachute Medal, the John Jeffries Award for outstanding contributions to medical research, the Aerospace Primus Award, induction into the USAF Special Operations Hall of Fame, the FAI Montgolfier Diplome, the Order of Daedalians Distinguished Achievement Award, induction as a Fellow in the Society of Experimental Test Pilots, the National Aeronautics Association Elder Statesman of Aviation Award, the Barnstormer of the Year Award, and induction in 1997 into the National Aviation Hall of Fame. He also has received numerous awards for solo transatlantic balloon flights.

Colonel Kittinger has written several articles about his 1960 leap for various periodicals, including "The Long, Lonely Leap," in 1961. He is still very active in aviation and space, serving as an Aviation and Aerospace Consultant and Barnstormer in a 1929 New Standard Open Cockpit Bi-Plane. He is also the subject of a new Naval Institute book, *The Pre-Astronauts*.