George William Lewis
(1882-1948)

George W. Lewis was born March 10, 1882, in Ithaca, New York. From Scranton High School, he went on to Cornell University, graduated in 1910 with a Masters degree in Mechanical Engineering, and then taught at Swarthmore College from 1910 to 1917. He advanced to become the head of research at Clarke Thomson in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, a private foundation for the promotion of aviation and aircraft engines. This, in turn, led to his membership on the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics' (NACA) Power Plants Subcommittee. In 1919, the NACA made Lewis its first Executive Officer, and then in 1924, gave him the title Director of Aeronautical Research, which he kept until 1947.

The NACA was an advisory committee made up of industry and military members. Lewis was the liaison between the committee and the Langley Laboratory. He worked with Congress and directly with the military. In 1936, Lewis traveled to Germany to investigate their aeronautical research program. Based on his recommendation to NACA that the U.S. program needed to be strengthened, two new research laboratories were later built, one in California and one in Cleveland. During his tenure, the NACA made many advances in aeronautics including the NACA engine cowling, retractable landing gear, and streamlining studies. The NACA characterized airfoil shapes for wings and propellers in wind tunnel testing which simplified aircraft design.

In April 1947, NACA's Cleveland laboratory was renamed the Flight Propulsion Research Laboratory to mark its transition from an engine laboratory, charged with assisting industry with its wartime development problems, to a laboratory with the freedom to explore areas in propulsion research that seemed to hold promise for the future. The following year, after the death of George W. Lewis, the laboratory became the Lewis Flight Propulsion Laboratory. Lewis' name,

more than any other, had stood behind the NACA's reputation for basic research in the prewar period. He had guided its work from the 1920's through World War II, winning the backing of key members of Congress through the force of his personality and his single-minded dedication to the institution he served.

Lewis' career is abundant with many significant awards and distinctions including two honorary doctorates. In 1934, he was appointed by Secretary Newton D. Baker to the Special Committee on the Army Air Corps (Baker Board). He was honored in 1936 with the Daniel Guggenheim Medal "for outstanding success in the direction of aeronautical research." He also served on boards and committees to make aeronautical awards to others and to sanction aviation performance records. In 1937, Lewis was appointed by the President to the Inter-American Aviation Conference in Peru, and in 1941, to the U.S. National Commission to deal with Inter-American aviation matters. During World War II, he served under presidential appointment on the National Inventors' Council. He served as a past President and Honorary Fellow of the Institute of the Aeronautical Sciences, and a member of the National Aeronautic Association, the Society of Automotive Engineers, American Society of Mechanical Engineers, National Academy of Sciences, and American Philosophical Society. In 1948, he received the U.S. Presidential Medal for Merit and the O.B.E. (Hon.) from Great Britain.

Lewis took NACA's legislative directive "…to supervise and direct the scientific study of the problems of flight with a view to their practical solution…" seriously and built a solid reputation for practical yet world-class research. That research tradition continues today.