Every once in a while you meet a person who changes you. Chip was one of those people. I knew him only for a very small part of his long and accomplished life but he had an outsized impact on me and I know I am not alone in that experience. Not only was he one of the best examples of the “Greatest Generation” but he was also a man of the present: engaged, informed, and open-minded.

Lightning played a big part in Chip’s life, taking his father from a Kentucky field when Chip was three years old. His mother was deathly afraid it would take her son too, so she taught him respect for the weather and for thunderstorms in particular. Vividly recalling through more than 80 years of memory, Chip recounted how his mother had told him to walk in the middle of the road even though he could have kept dry on the tree-lined sidewalk. “All of a sudden, I was on my ass” Chip drawled, “there was only a smoking stump left of the tree I had just passed under”. He would recount a few other airborne encounters with lightning but his respect for the elements was a factor in him surviving some of the most perilous flying of the war in the Pacific.

Chip’s long flying career has been well decorated and documented including a Distinguished Flying Cross and the Air Medal with Four Clusters. An excellent video about him was produced when he was inducted into Kentucky’s Aviation Hall of Fame. (Search on Charles L. “Chip” Collins). It outlines how Chip got the aviation bug when both he and powered flight were young. They grew up together, each enriching the other.

When war broke out in Europe, Chip so badly wanted to be part of the fight that he crossed the border into Canada and joined the Royal Canadian Air Force. Prior to his deployment, the US had joined the war and so began his long military career with the US Army Air Corps. His piloting skills were put to use for a time as an instructor and then he shipped out to the South Pacific. He led the crew of his B-29 “Warsaw Pigeon” over Japan and back to Tinian safely 35 times using his skill, judgment, and courage.

After the war, Chip became a test pilot at Wright Field in Dayton. “What was your favorite aircraft?” I asked him once. He pondered a bit and said, “the ME-109”. Not an answer I expected, but I got a keen pilot’s review of how it compared to its contemporary Allied aircraft as if he had flown it yesterday.

Chip was hand picked by Dr. Charles Stark Draper to build and run the MIT (later Draper Labs) Flight Facility in Bedford, Massachusetts in the early 1950s. After politely refusing an insulting offer by the MIT personnel officer, he got a call from “Doc”. “Chipper, get your ass back here, and I’ll look after the paymaster”, he said. With no more than that as a contract, Chip flew back from Dayton and began a new career.
This was the dawn of practical inertial navigation and Chip made the first coast-to-coast flight guided solely by a set of monstrous flywheels spinning in the back of his C-97 Stratocruiser. Naysayers refused to believe that this new technology really worked and, when it was successfully demonstrated in a long east to west flight, they claimed it could not possibly work in north-south navigation. To demonstrate otherwise, Chip found himself in Puerto Rico witnessing yet another piece of history. He asked the Airfield Manager what kind of ungainly bird was taking off into the sunrise. “They call it the U2,” he said, “but I didn’t tell you that.”

Like many of his generation, Chip was proud of his achievements but not boastful. He considered that he had simply done his bit. The last story he told me was about flying out of Muroc. He paused. “They call it Edwards now, after Glen”. I said, “You knew Glen Edwards?” “Yes” he said, “him and Chuck, but anyway we took off out of Muroc…” I missed the rest of that story contemplating the rich slice of American history sitting beside me in the car.

With over 60 type entries and 15,000 hours in his logbooks, it is hard to imagine a more complete pilot. But an even more impressive aspect of Chip was his completeness as a man. “I started late” he said of establishing his family with Beverly. “But it was worth the wait”, he said simply. Arriving back from a QB event at any hour in any weather, we would be met by Bev and one of his three daughters: Kirsten, Karen or Karla. Also in the greeting party was Chip’s faithful companion Pedro who, I am sure, is still watching the door.

Blue Skies and Fair Winds Chip.

Respectfully Submitted
Scott C. Lewis, BOS