Charles L. “Chip” Collins of Westford, MA passed away January 24th, 2015 at age 95, following a brief illness. Collins was former chief engineering test pilot and flight facility manager at Draper Laboratory in Bedford, Massachusetts.

Chip was born February 18, 1919 in Pewee Valley, Oldham County, Kentucky to Hunter M. Collins and Louise (Howell) Collins. In 1935, at age 16, he earned his student pilot license. In 1941 he entered the Royal Canadian Air Force and trained as a fighter pilot. After Pearl Harbor, he transferred to the U.S. Army Air Corps where he instructed in twin engine aircraft, and progressed through B-17 and B-29. Stationed on Tinian Island in the Marianas in 1944-45 he flew 35 combat missions as B-29 Aircraft Commander in the 9th Bomb Group, in high altitude daylight formation precision bombing, low level night incendiary, mining and radar countermeasure missions over Japan.

Following VJ day, Chip was assigned to the Armament Laboratory at Wright Field, Ohio where he graduated from the first established Test Pilot School, where he tested and evaluated bombers and fighters as well as captured enemy and allied aircraft. There, he was recruited by Dr. Charles Stark Draper in 1947 to The Instrumentation Lab at MIT (later renamed C. S. Draper Laboratory). There he oversaw the construction of the MIT Flight Facility, completed in 1949 at Bedford Airport (L.G. Hanscom Field), Massachusetts. He served as the facility manager and chief engineering test pilot for 32 years.

In 1953 in a B-29, Chip was Pilot-in-Command of the then-classified but now historic SPIRE (Spatial Inertial Reference Equipment) flight, the first transcontinental, nonstop, pure inertial navigation flight which was considered the genesis of the Apollo moon landing and ultimate success of the U.S. space program. In 1957, the flight was recreated for a national television audience for which Chip flew coast-to-coast in a C-97 with newsman Eric Sevareid onboard for the CBS program, “Conquest.” SPIRE is now held by the Smithsonian Institution for future display at the National Air & Space Museum in Washington.

During his tenure with MIT and Draper Laboratory, Chip participated in the development and flight testing of prototypes and subsequent inertial navigation systems leading to successful applications in civilian and military aircraft, space exploration, and missile defense for such
programs as NASA’s Apollo Moon Program and the U.S. Navy’s Fleet Ballistic Missiles—Polaris, Poseidon, and Trident. He piloted the Digital-Fly-By-Wire test flight in the 1970s which demonstrated the advancement of flight control from analog to digital flight control enabling vast improvements in flight safety. In addition, he was a guest lecturer in the MIT Aeronautics and Astronautics Department and emphasized the role of the test pilot in civil and military aviation.

Chip had over 15,000 pilot hours in more than 60 different aircraft, including single and multi-engine reciprocating aircraft, single and multi-engine jets, and single and multi-engine helicopters. His pilot ratings included ATP, commercial, instrument, CFI, helicopter and glider. A graduate of the USAF Air War College, Chip retired from the Air Force Reserve as Colonel in 1973 after 30 years of commissioned service.

His military awards include the Distinguished Flying Cross, Air Medal with Four Clusters, Meritorious Service Medal, and Asiatic Pacific Medal with Four Battle Stars.

Chip was the 1979 recipient of the Godfrey L. Cabot Award for outstanding contributions to the development of aviation and aerospace science. He received the National Aeronautic Association’s 1996 Elder Statesman of Aviation award and, in 2003, he was one of six aviation pioneers honored in an Emmy-nominated documentary, “Beyond Kitty Hawk,” which aired on PBS. In 2010, he was inducted into The Kentucky Aviation Hall of Fame.

Chip was a Fellow of the Society of Experimental Test Pilots; former National Director of the Air Force Association; a Past President and Advisor of the Aero Club of New England; a member of the Order of Quiet Birdmen; a member of the Military Pilots Order of Daedalians; the Simon W. Robinson Lodge, Lexington, MA; and a member of First Parish Church United in Westford, MA.

During his life Chip enjoyed sailing, hunting, trap-shooting, riding his motorcycle, and flying his Piper J-5. He spent 50 winters on St Croix boating when he was not working on the family home. Chip was passionate about music, especially opera. He will long be remembered for his storytelling, his passion for history and his love for his country.

Chip leaves behind his devoted wife of 47 years, Beverly Bell Collins; his three loving daughters, Kirsten Collins of Westford, MA; Karen Collins and her son, Hunter Matley of Westford, MA; Karla (Collins) Eck, her husband, Jean-Louis, and their children, Charles Gabriel and Yvette. Chip also leaves his faithful canine companion “Pedro”; and many loving nieces, nephews, and good friends, all who will miss him dearly.