



Born in August of 1920, Donald O. "Spec" Campen, my grandfather (so nicknamed because his face was so freckled as a boy someone once said, "he just looks like one giant speck!") came of age in the rural south during the Great Depression and voluntarily enlisted to defend our country after the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. He was trained as a B-17 Toggler (Bombardier) and assigned to the Eighth Air Force (the "Mighty Eighth"), 303rd Bomb Group, 427th Squadron. They were the original "Hell's Angels", the first B-17 group to complete 25 combat missions, going on to fly over 300, more than any other bomb group in the war. A bona fide war hero, he personally survived 14 bombing missions crammed into the close quarters of the transparent nose cone of a "Flying Fortress" and still carries the memory of crash landing in the Harz Mountains of Northern Germany in the form of a glass shard firmly embedded in his now 94-year-old rear-end, the result of some quick thinking by his crew mates who yanked him from his seat just as enemy fire shattered his glass perch leaving the shrapnel the kindest possible area as it's only target. It's become a bit of a family joke now, but had the efforts of his fellow soldiers been delayed by even a moment...

It's only natural that working on ALL MY SONS would cause me to contemplate the implications of their quick thinking, but Spec doesn't dwell on what could've happened to him had their timing been off, "The experience I had can't come close to the guys who went in in '43 and '44 when they were losing seven or eight or 10 planes at a time. I was very fortunate."

Just a few years younger than Arthur Miller (and maybe not so coincidentally Chris Keller), and never one to be shy, Spec has, for as long as I've known him, endeavored to connect in a meaningful way with the world around him. I've never been anywhere with him when he didn't know *someone*. He's spent time with presidents and Academy Award winners, Major League Baseball Hall of Famers and tech visionaries... my father still talks about meeting then President Reagan along a parade route when Spec realized that he happened to know one of the Secret Service detail and called him over with The Gipper in tow. He's had three careers, as an insurance adjuster, in politics, and now, in his "retirement" as an actor and sometimes consultant on over 60 films and television shows filmed in my hometown of Richmond, VA. He's served on more boards, committees, and civic organizations than anyone can count – he's still an active member of his local PTA, and my mother graduated school in 1967! It is, quite simply, a lifetime of giving back - filled with purposeful connections that are the product of an obligation he feels to those men in that cockpit 70 years ago.

He wrote to me recently in response to some questions I had asked about the war, "Away from home, my personality prevails as I am relaxed and accepted for the reputation of years. Since my loved youth, I was born to be out front,



leading for good and I have truly tried to be that kin you cannot be embarrassed by.” Far from being embarrassed, I’m proud to have had the opportunity to know him and owe him untold debt for the example he’s provided.

In spite of, or rather maybe *because* of the fear and despair that infected our country from the stock market crash of 1929 through the Bataan Death March and Pearl Harbor and all of WWII into the Red Scare of the 1950s and the simmering anxiety of the Cold War - through his personal sacrifices and his suffering, through his optimism and his belief in his fellow man – my grandfather taught me what it means to be grateful and what a privilege it is to be free and to be alive. He taught me that the right to life and the pursuit of happiness – the right to the American Dream – comes with a cost and that’s the obligation that we all, all of us, every single one of us - regardless of any difference of philosophy, biology, gender or class - has to each other.

If ALL MY SONS is about anything, it’s about gratitude and the belief that if we looked on each other as brothers and obligated ourselves to the notion that if one of us falls, we all fall and no single one of us can rise until we all rise, then, and only then, will we find the strength to truly experience individual freedom and enjoy the full promise of our dreams. Be grateful, live well. Thank you, Spec.

Photos:

Top: Staff Sergeant Donald O. “Spec” Campen circa 1945

Bottom: Spec Campen next to the Memphis Belle B-17 Flying Fortress, 2013. Photo credit: Bob Brown