


Jones-Walker & Son Funeral Home and Cremation Service

Otha Cleo Spencer

(April 27, 1920 - June 1, 2012)

 Otha Cleo Spencer passed away peacefully on a Friday morning, June 1, 2012 at Briarcliff Health Center in Greenville, Texas – wearing his ever-favorite World War II cap, proudly decorated with his 65-year Masonic pin. He left the world with a smile on his face and memorable smiles within the hearts of everyone who had known him and loved him during his ten months at Briarcliff. His compassion and humor deeply touched everyone who knew him.



Otha was born on April 27, 1920 in Lone Oak, Texas to Barney Byron Spencer and Flora Rudd Spencer. He grew up in Greenville with his brother Ollie Leo Spencer, until he moved to Commerce in 1938 to attend college.

The young student Otha met his wife and best friend of 66 years at the boarding house of Mr. and Mrs. Claude Abernathy in Commerce, where he worked his way through college washing dishes. He always told the story of enlisting the then 17 year old Abernathy daughter, Billie Ermine, to help with the final rinse so they could hold hands under the water. He would conclude the tale of how he started with a job and ended up with a wife. On January 28, 1943, Otha married Billie in Columbia, South Carolina before he headed off for his tenure in World War II.

During World War II, Otha served in the U. S. Army Air Force. He was assigned to the China-Burma-India Theater, where he flew supplies over the Hump (the eastern end of the Himalayas) from India to China. Otha was also a B-25 instructor, a weather reconnaissance pilot in the North Atlantic, and a hurricane reconnaissance pilot in the South Atlantic.

Otha graduated from East Texas State Teachers College (now Texas A&M University Commerce) with a B.S. in 1941 and an M.S. in 1946. In 1955, he earned his Ph.D. from the University of Missouri School of Journalism, Columbia.

After the war, Otha returned to Commerce and joined the ETSU faculty in 1948, where he taught photography and journalism until his retirement in 1978 with the title of Professor Emeritus. He is recognized and remembered for establishing the university's photojournalism program, one of the top programs in the university system at that time. Soon after his arrival back in Commerce, he and Billie had a son, John and a daughter, Mary who both attended Texas A&M University Commerce.

After retiring from teaching, Otha continued to write and work as a commercial photographer. He and Billie also ran the Country Studio, a

wonderful cozy whimsical shop, which sold unique gifts, antiques and collectibles, as well as custom picture framing. People came to The Country Studio from all around East Texas to shop for unique gifts and enjoy a cup of coffee and conversation in the store's scenic and peaceful setting within the oak trees of the Spencer Compound and among the wide array of various dogs, cats, horses, and wildlife.

Active in the Commerce community, Otha was named Citizen of the Year by the Commerce Chamber of Commerce in 1991. He also founded the Commerce Public Library Literacy Program in 1991, which is still in operation.

In both 1996 and 2006, Otha was presented with the Texas A&M University Commerce Spirit of Mayo Citation, given to individuals for exemplifying the credo of founder William L. Mayo, for unselfish service to others. He also received the University's Distinguished Alumnus Citation in 2007, which recognizes career achievements that bring honor to the University.

Otha was a member of the First United Methodist Church in Commerce for over 60 years. He taught Sunday School classes and was instrumental with the FUMC Foundation in building the new church on Highway 50.

He was also a member of the Masonic Lodge in Commerce, and in 2011 received his 65th year Masonic pin.

Otha wrote over 300 magazine articles and twelve books, including *Flying the Hump: Memories of an Air War* relating his experiences as a Hump pilot and *Flying the Weather* about his experiences as a weather reconnaissance pilot. Otha and Billie also co-edited the *Commerce Handbook*, an encyclopedia of people and events of Commerce and the University. Otha's last book was *That Lonesome Whistle: The History of the Cotton Belt in Commerce*. For many years, Otha also wrote the "Bits & Pieces" weekly column in the *Commerce Journal*.

Otha is survived by a son John Spencer and his wife Joanne of San Jose, California, daughter Mary Spencer of Dallas, Texas, grandson Will Spencer and his wife Janyce of Concord, California, granddaughter Gwendolyn Spencer of San Jose, California, and great granddaughter Emi Elyse Spencer of Concord, California.

He was preceded in death by his parents, his brother, and his beloved wife Billie Spencer.

Committal service will be at Brigham Cemetery in Campbell, Saturday, June 23, 2012, at 10:00 A.M. conducted by Hopkins County Military Coalition and Commerce Masonic Lodge 439.

Celebration of Life for Otha will be at 11:00 A.M. at the First United Methodist Church on Hwy 24/50, Commerce, with a reception to follow at Texas A&M University Heritage House & Gardens.

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