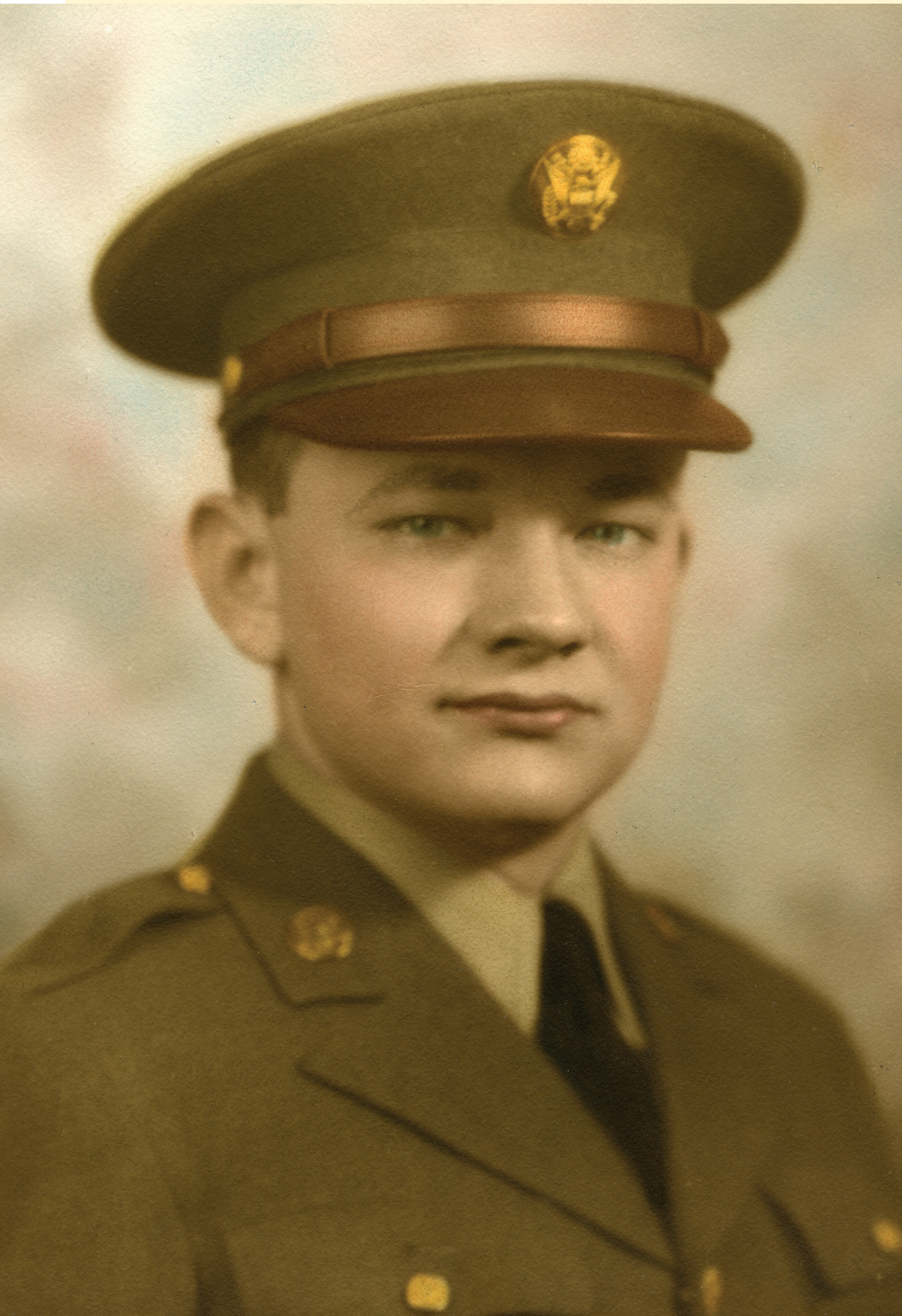


FATHERS AND SONS

Brian Speer remembers his dad, Brock Speer



Brock Speer begins his military career

When Brian Speer is working the product table for his wife, singer Allison Durham Speer, he spends almost as much time answering questions about his family as he does selling records. That's because the soft-spoken, quick-witted producer/engineer/studio owner happens to belong to one of the most famous dynasties in gospel music history, the Speer Family. In one incarnation or another, the Speer Family sang, toured, wrote songs and performed on radio and television for an astounding 77 years. Though the group officially retired in 1998, there are still several generations of faithful Speer Family fans around, so Brian is used to being pulled aside and asked about Mary Tom's health, or what years Jeanne Johnson sang in the group, or if Ben will be at the next Homecoming concert. He always smiles graciously and answers in full, but if you really want to see his eyes light up, ask him about his daddy—Brock Speer.

Since this is our Memorial Day issue, I asked Brian to tell me about his father's military service during WWII, a subject that admittedly wasn't talked about very much while Brian was growing up. "I think I'm pretty accurate in saying that Dad hated every minute of it," Brian says with a grin. "He wanted so badly to be home with his family, but he believed in doing his duty."

It was not long after the bombing of Pearl Harbor when young Brock Speer received his draft notice, and was ordered to say goodbye to Montgomery, Ala., and report to an Air Force center in Illinois. Reluctantly leaving his parents, siblings and singing career behind, Brock arrived at Chanute Field and began his 16-month training period. He missed his family more than he could even express, which his first letter home proved—"Send my guitar," was about all it said.

Eventually Brock discovered a humble little Nazarene church just a half mile from the base, led by Rev. Hoke and his wife, who welcomed the homesick bass singer into their congregation like he was one of their own. With the help of a permanent weekend pass, Brock began singing at church every Sunday, enjoying home-cooked meals and hospitality



Brian and Brock, May 1962



Ben and Brock



Brock in uniform with his proud parents



Brian and Brock at NQC, 1998

at the Hokes' cottage and sometimes even spending the night. Brian says, "I'd never heard this before, but about a year ago Mother told me that the reason Dad stayed away from the base so much was because he was really uncomfortable with how some of the troops acted. There was always a lot of drinking going on, and guys were sneaking women into their tents. Dad would just head off on his own somewhere and go read his Bible. That's why his nickname was 'The Reverend!'"

After training, Brock's unit headed to Hampton Roads, Va., where they boarded a beat-up old freight hauler and shipped out to Italy. They endured a harrowing 28-day ocean crossing before finally arriving in Naples Bay, a beautiful harbor with a smoking Mount Vesuvius as a backdrop. For the next year and a half Brock hauled supplies for the Air Force, navigating Italy's dangerously winding roads to deliver food, gasoline and even bombs to the troops. He missed singing, so during his off-duty hours he put together a quartet that sang at the base chapel on Sundays.

In the winter of 1944, Brock's unit was sent to Corsica as reinforcement for the planned Allied invasion of southern France. Two months later they returned to Italy, and were shocked to see that the beautiful towns and countryside they had left were now littered with bombed-out buildings, burned villages and homeless, hungry people. But in May, just as they were preparing to dig in and wait out the fighting, word came of Germany's surrender. The war was still raging in Japan, but Brock's unit was given a furlough and allowed to temporarily return to the States before getting reassigned to the Pacific to continue fighting. It took a full month on a troop ship before they finally landed on U.S. soil, but all Brock could think about was that he had 30 glorious days to spend at home with his family.

The story of Brock's homecoming is a Speer family favorite. "Of course I wasn't even born yet," Brian says, "but I've heard it told many times." The family knew he was coming home on leave, but they had no idea when he would actually arrive. Upon landing in Virginia, Brock hopped the first bus he could find to Atlanta, then rode another one down to Gadsden, Ala., where he knew the Speer Family was performing that night. He arranged for one of his old friends from Montgomery to pick him up at the bus station, and they headed across town to the church. Brock stood quietly in the very back of the sanctuary, and just as they swung into the chorus of "Crown Him King," Dad Speer glanced up and

did a double take. He jumped off the stage, sending microphones flying, and raced down the aisle as hard as he could run. Brock met him in the middle, and father and son held on to each other while the rest of the family happily piled off the stage and joined the celebration. "What an amazing scene that must have been," Brian says with satisfaction. "And then Daddy got right up on the platform with them and started singing like he'd never left!"

Brock had missed performing with the Speer Family so much that he was determined to spend his 30-day furlough making up for lost time. Their first booking was a week-long singing school in Alexander City, but the first day's classes were disrupted by a person who ran outside yelling, "The war is over! Japan has surrendered to the Allies, the war is over!" They all gathered around the radio, scarcely able to believe it could be true, waiting for confirmation. "Dad would have been heading straight into the middle of the Japanese invasion in a matter of weeks," Brian reflects. "And now the fighting was over. There was a lot of hand-wringing and agonizing over the use of the bomb, but my dad had none of that. For the rest of his life, whenever the name Harry Truman was mentioned, Dad always said, 'That man probably saved my life.'"

After the war, Brock Speer met and married Faye Ihrig, who also sang with the group, and they had three children: Suzan, Marc and Brian. Brock went to Trevecca Nazarene College on the GI Bill, and eventually received his Master of Divinity degree from Vanderbilt University. He traveled and sang with the Speer Family until his death in 1999, and was universally loved and respected throughout the gospel music industry.

As we end our conversation, I ask Brian what he misses most about his dad. He thinks for a minute and then says, "I think I just miss being able to talk to him. He was very wise, and he always gave great advice. I think he was the most genuinely good man I ever met in my life. And I try every day to live up to that." **H**

TORI TAFF is an author, speaker and Grammy-nominated songwriter. She and her husband Russ Taff live in Bell Buckle, Tenn., with their daughters Madi Rose and Charlotte. Tori writes about her life on her blog: babybloomr.com

