

“Gone but Not Forgotten”

Capt. Skip Sanders (Medically Retired), born Richard D. Sanders III, passed away after a brief illness on September 22, 2022; a profound loss to his family, United States Air Force Academy 1973 classmates, many friends, as well as the US Air Force, for which he was still serving nearly 50 years after graduating. Few people met and overcame life's challenges quite as well as Skip.

Skip was born into a military family and thus moved frequently, starting high school at Seventy-First HS in Fayetteville NC, moving to Kubasaki HS in Okinawa, and then graduating back at Seventy-First HS. He was a standout athlete in football and track and held the school record for the 880. He was extremely popular as well, even though he drove to school in a Renault Dauphine with a Skip-applied racing stripe (remember Skip was in a NASCAR state). Diversely, he was a drummer in a rock band that won a high school Battle of the Bands.

Skip was accepted at all three Academies choosing USAFA because he wanted to fly. Skip was a proud member of the 34th Squadron Loose Hawks, where he was an ambivalent student but an enthusiastic natural athlete in whichever intramural sport he played. While it may be an overstatement that anyone can give more than 100% of their best effort, Skip did. He could overtake the lead in the last lap of an individual medley, win the race, and then collapse. There are classmates who remember Skip for his athleticism and a typical memory is “he was the only one to beat me in boxing.”

Skip's passion at the Academy was parachuting with the Wings of Blue, who were the collegiate champions every year he competed with them. Skip was #1 Overall National Collegiate Parachuting Champion his last two years. Previously, in his sophomore year, when it grated him that he couldn't compete at the top level because he didn't have enough jumps, Skip was the Intermediate Overall Champion. When he graduated USAFA he had accrued 850 jumps and became one of the few Air Force officers to achieve and wear Master Jump Wings.

After graduation and pilot training he 'suffered' the T-33 assignment just to get into the aircraft he loved, the F-106, where he excelled - rising quickly to become an instructor. He attended Interceptor Weapons School (IWS) at Tyndall AFB and was a Squadron Weapons and Tactics officer for that aircraft. With the new F-15 and F-16 coming into the inventory, he was quite happy to tell anyone the strengths of the F-106 compared to the new aircraft. All this helped get him an assignment back to the schoolhouse as an IWS instructor.

That did not happen. He lost control of his motorcycle in 1980 at Minot AFB and was left a paraplegic. He bounced back. Characteristically, he demonstrated to the Veterans Rehab

Hospital staff that their program was too slow by escaping and wheeling himself around town before he was supposed to even leave the hospital.

Less than two years later, he was hired as the fighter pilot expert to run the Air Force's Air Combat Maneuvering Instrumentation Range at his beloved Tyndall AFB. There, fighter pilots could engage in dogfights and then see where their boasting was not quite spot-on... and where they could improve in a real environment. For over 40 years, Skip led continuous upgrades as technology improved and fighters modernized. Two weeks before he passed, Skip was working. "Fixture," "icon," and "legend" were frequent descriptors of him from staff and commanders. In his time, the estimate is that he passed "killed" or "nice shot" judgements on some 10,000 fighter pilots who flew on his range. And they all remember the head guy in the wheelchair, both at the console and at the bar. Ten years ago, the US Government recognized his value with a service award in a large DC hotel, presented by the AF Chief of Staff and squadron-mate, General Norty Schwartz. He arguably served the USAF longer than any of his classmates, literally up to his death, and did so with a profound disability few people really understand.

Skip made friends with everyone, everywhere, widening his ever-growing 'family.' The best decision in his life, everyone agrees, was to marry Joanne Nagy. He is survived by his wife Joanne, sister Gena Sanders, daughter Melissa (Allen) Chan, sons Steve (Jenna) Nagy, Mike (Joanna) Nagy, Danny (Harmony) Nagy, grandchildren Kylee Chan, Leah Chan, Alexa (Patrick) Kelly, Stevie Nagy, Jack Nagy, Joey Nagy, Owen Nagy, Olivia Nagy, two nieces Krysten Hotchkis and Kaitlyn Clark. Skip was a life-long member of The Order of Daedalians, a fraternal order of military pilots, where he became the Flight Captain of Flight 89, Pelicans. He is active in the Emerald Coast Corvette Club and a member of St. Dominic Catholic Church. Skip was ultimately a social creature, loved jazz music, model airplanes and expanding his contact list. He was gracious to those not quite understanding of physical disabilities, eager to host barbecues and just about any event, and lived for challenges. Especially when told he couldn't do something. Skip was an eye-watering inspiration to us all. And he left a huge hole in our hearts.