

Competitive Spirit

Thomas M. Carr's competitive spirit brought him to Clemson. Carr won five consecutive Pennsylvania State Slalom Water Skiing Championships, but it was his performance as a high school wrestler that earned him a scholarship offer from the Tigers. Carr was a three-time sectional and two-time district wrestling champion at the scholastic level. At Clemson, Carr majored in mechanical engineering and, as a senior, captained coach Eddie Griffin's wrestling squad. Competing in the 150-pound weight class, Carr was ranked as high as sixteenth in the country.

After earning his Clemson degree in 1984, Carr reported for active duty with the Air Force. He channeled his competitive spirit into flight training, emerging as an F-16 fighter pilot.

Carr flew combat missions while on tours of duty in the Persian Gulf, Italy, Turkey, Bahrain, Bosnia, and Iraq. He flew more than 2,000 fighter sorties and helped enforce the "no-fly" zone imposed over northern Iraq in 1997.

After Carr left active duty to take a job as a check pilot with American Airlines, he remained in the Air Force Reserve. Air Force officials noted that Carr was so "well respected by his superiors and peers for his flying skills, knowledge, attitude, and judgment" that he was selected "to attend F-16 Fighter Weapons Instructor Course, an opportunity rarely afforded to part-time Reserve pilots."

By September 1998, Carr was flying for American Airlines out of Miami, serving as an assistant wrestling coach at Coconut Creek High School, and training monthly as an Air Force Reserve instructor pilot with the 93rd Fighter Squadron. On Friday, September 11, Carr completed a trip with American and that night checked into quarters at Homestead Air Reserve Station. The following morning, he reported for a scheduled briefing for a training flight in which he was to take part.

The Saturday training exercise was a surface attack tactics mission involving four F-16s and labeled "Shark." The flight of four aircraft would be divided into two elements of two aircraft



each. Carr would be flying in Shark 3, the lead aircraft in the second element. In order to preserve a safety margin, the two flight elements would be separated by three miles and would offset by 2000 meters.

The lead aircraft roared down Homestead's runway at 1429 hours, followed at fifteen second intervals by the other three F-16s. They were bound for the bombing range at Avon Park, about 200 miles north of Homestead in central Florida. Once in position, the flight received clearance from the range control officer to begin its bomb run. The first two fighters descended to 500 feet and simulated their weapons releases. Carr's Shark 3 then approached the target, simulated his bomb release, and egressed from the target area as briefed. At this point, Shark 3's speed was 440 knots—more than 500 miles per hour—a speed at which a three-mile safety margin can vanish in a blink. Air Force investigators opined that Carr, in coming out of his bomb run, lost sight of the lead aircraft and then glimpsed one of the F-16s very near to his own. He attempted to execute a collision avoidance maneuver but did not have sufficient altitude. Before he could complete the ejection procedure, Carr's F-16 slammed into the marshy ground and he was killed.

Major Carr was posthumously awarded the Meritorious Service Medal, the citation for which praised his “outstanding professional skill, leadership, and ceaseless efforts.” It continued:

Major Carr was the epitome of the citizen airman. His career reflected a distinctively genuine concern for his fellow warriors, and he established the standard for all of those who selflessly dedicate their lives in the service of the United States Air Force.

Major Thomas M. Carr was survived by his parents and was buried in Laurel Hill Cemetery, Millcreek Township, Erie County, Pennsylvania. In 2018, the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation dedicated the bridge carrying West 38th Street across Interstate 79 in memory of Major Carr.

