

## Panther Pilot

Billy Clyde Sims played football and served as president of his senior class at Greenville High School. He enrolled at Clemson College in 1949 and remained for three years, rising in the ranks to the position of platoon sergeant in Company C, 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Cadet Regiment.

After his junior year, Sims left Clemson to enlist in the Navy's Air Cadet program. He was sent to Corpus Christi, Texas for his initial training and then on to Pensacola, Florida where he earned his pilot's wings and was commissioned a second lieutenant in the Marine Corps.

In March 1954, Sims was assigned to Marine Fighter Squadron 334 based at Cherry Point, North Carolina. Second Lieutenant Sims and his wife, the former Dorothy Hicks of Columbus, Mississippi, set up housekeeping in nearby Havelock.

Sims's squadron was equipped with the F9F Panther jet fighter. Manufactured by Grumman, the F9F was one of the United States' first successful carrier-based jet fighters. Used extensively by the Navy and Marines during the Korean War, the Panther was a single-engine, straight wing, day fighter armed with four 20 mm cannon and capable of carrying an assortment of air-to-ground munitions.



On Thursday, August 5, 1954, Sims was piloting an F9F in a flight of four such aircraft making an approach to land at Oceana Naval Air Station near Virginia Beach, Virginia. Sims's plane crashed into 30 feet of water offshore of the airfield. A nearby lifeguard

heard the impact and "looked up and saw the plane bouncing and then begin to break." The lifeguard used his surfboard to reach the scene of the crash, but the Panther slipped beneath the water just after he arrived.

A rescue helicopter and crash boat reached the scene within 15 minutes and found bits of the wreckage, but not Sims. Seven hours after the crash, Navy divers recovered Sims's body still strapped into his cockpit.

