

James W. Thomas, Jr., Col USAF (Ret), Age 80

Colonel James “Jim” Thomas, United States Air Force (Retired)—a devoted protector, decorated pilot, and steadfast leader—passed away leaving behind a legacy of courage, service, and quiet heroism. Born on August 28, 1945, in Richmond, Virginia, Jim lived a life defined by duty to his country, commitment to excellence, and devotion to those he loved.

Jim’s journey of service began with his graduation from Marion Military Institute in Marion, Alabama, in 1964. He then entered the United States Air Force Academy, where he earned his commission as a second lieutenant upon graduating in 1968. Dedicated to lifelong learning, he later completed a Master of Arts in International Relations from Creighton University in 1979 and pursued extensive professional military education, including Squadron Officer School, Air Command and Staff College, Air War College, and studies in National Security Management.



In 1969, Jim earned his pilot wings at Big Spring Air Force Base, Texas, launching an extraordinary aviation career that would span over two decades. He first served in the Panama Canal Zone as a U-10 pilot with the 24th Special Operations Squadron, where he began demonstrating the skill and composure that would define his service.

His assignment to Southeast Asia in 1971 placed him at the front lines of conflict. Serving as an O 2A Forward Air Controller instructor pilot with the 21st Tactical Air Support Squadron at Tan Son Nhut Air Base, Republic of Vietnam, Jim flew critical missions under dangerous conditions. He also served as an advisor to the Cambodian Air Force, exemplifying not only technical mastery but also leadership and dedication to allied forces. During this period, Jim embodied the role of protector—guiding missions, safeguarding fellow service members, and facing adversity with unwavering resolve.

Following his combat service, Jim continued his distinguished career in strategic reconnaissance. At Offutt Air Force Base, Nebraska, and later at Headquarters Strategic Air Command, he served in both operational and leadership roles involving RC-135 reconnaissance aircraft and global intelligence operations. His assignments included serving with the Organization of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, at the Pentagon, in Washington, D.C., as an action officer specializing in reconnaissance programs and space division, Deputy Directorate of Operations, Reconnaissance, Space, Electronic Warfare, and Command Control Communications Countermeasures.

Returning to Offutt in 1983, Jim continued to lead from the cockpit and beyond, serving as an instructor pilot, Chief of Standardization and Evaluation, Operations Officer, and Commander of the 38th Strategic Reconnaissance Squadron. He later took on senior leadership roles at Eielson Air Force Base, Alaska, and again at Offutt, culminating in service as Deputy Director of Reconnaissance Operations at Headquarters Strategic Air Command. He retired honorably on June 10, 1994.

A command pilot with more than 6,500 flying hours, Colonel Thomas earned numerous decorations reflecting his valor and excellence, including the Distinguished Flying Cross with two oak leaf clusters, the Air Medal with 14 oak leaf clusters, the Defense Meritorious Service Medal, the Meritorious Service Medal with two oak leaf clusters, and the Air Force Commendation Medal.

Beyond his military career, Jim remained deeply connected to the Air Force community. He served with great honors as the President of the 55th Wing Association for 12 years, strengthening bonds among fellow veterans and preserving the legacy of the reconnaissance mission. In 2018, he was inducted into the 55th Wing Hall of Fame.

Jim was preceded in death by his wife, Karen Thomas. He is survived by his wife, Sharon Thomas; his children, Dawn Johnson, Christy Thomas, Jimmy Thomas, and Angie Shehan; and by numerous relatives and friends across the country who knew him as a man of integrity, strength, and compassion.

To those who served with him, Jim was a trusted leader. To his family, he was a steadfast protector and source of unwavering support. To all who knew him, he was a quiet hero whose life made the world safer and better.

In lieu of flowers, the family welcomes memorial donations to the Stephen Center or the 55th Wing Association, causes that reflect Jim's enduring commitment to service and community.

Visitation: Monday, June 22, 2026, 5:00 – 7:00 p.m., Bellevue Memorial Chapel

Committal Service: Tuesday, June 23, 2026, 11:00 a.m., Omaha National Cemetery

Military Honors: Offutt Air Force Base Honor Guard