Cliff James Judkins III Obituary

**With** profound sadness, we say goodbye to Cliff James Judkins III (Marietta, Georgia), whose vibrant spirit touched the lives of many. Cliff James left this world on May 19, 2024 at the age of 86, leaving a void in the lives of so many people. You can send your sympathy in the guestbook provided and share it with the family.

He was predeceased by : his parents, Cliff James Judkins, Jr. and Cynthia Ellison Judkins. He is survived by his children, Virginia "Jenny" Angela Heath Judkins and James "Jim" Christopher Heath Judkins; his grandchildren, Claire Heath Luttrell, Anna-Laura Catherine Luttrell, Thomas Christopher Judkins and William Joseph Judkins; his sister Cynthia Judkins Godbold; and his children-in-law, Dr. Joseph Luttrell and Lisa Lambert Judkins.

In lieu of flowers, please make a donation to the Salvation Army or St. Jude's Children Hospital.

**VMA-131 Testimonials**

**Email** from Col. Robert Beavis: Cliff James Judkins III QB# 40698, ATL Cliff James Judkins III, a world-famous name in aviation history, died on 19 May 2024 in his home in the Jefferson Township community in east Cobb County, Ga.  On 21 Jun 1963, Marine LT Judkins escaped a burning Navy Vought F-8U Crusader jet fighter, fell 15,000 feet into the Pacific under a partially deployed chute, and survived. The story was reported in virtually every U.S. aviation magazine. He had been invited to tell of his miraculous survival to hundreds of organizations throughout the nation. Cliff looked death in the eye and, well, the first time anyway, death blinked. Meeting him made you to think, “Wait, this guy is not supposed to be here. How in heck am I lucky enough to shake his hand.” But who was the man behind the oft told flaming Crusader story? Cliff never saw himself as a hero. He reserved that term for others like his friend and fellow Atlanta QB, D. Wayne Waddell, who endured almost six years of brutality as an Air Force POW in North Vietnamese prison camps. Cliff never was a braggart and did not suffer braggarts gently. His first question to friend or stranger was, “What have you been up to lately?” Cliff was tremendously proud of his children and grandchildren. He was widely accepted in various organizations. After his military career, he became a highly respected captain with Delta Air Lines. He would tell his story at the drop of a hat but, unlike the craven ancient mariner in Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s classic poem, he never forced it upon you. Toward the end, he was declared 100% disabled by the Veterans Administration. As the years went by, he was increasingly beset by the results of injuries inflicted by his fall into the sea. He rarely complained and never yielded until death refused to blink and finally had its way. Cliff comes from twelve generations of Americans - the first arriving in the "New World" in 1622 in Jamestown, Va.  A native Alabamian, he was born on 17 Jun 1937. He was graduated from Sidney Lanier High School in Montgomery, Ala.  He attended Marion Military Institute in Marion, Ala., and then enrolled in Auburn University. He joined the U.S. Navy as an Aviation Cadet (NavCad) and won his wings of gold in May 1960.  Commissioned as an officer in the United States Marine Corps, he often reminded us that he got to be a Marine “the easy way” (by not having to go through their rigorous basic training program). Nevertheless, he demonstrated in word and deed that he was Marine tough. Cliff received his wings as a Naval aviator.  He joined Marine Squadron VMF-323, the Death Rattlers, and was based at El Toro MCAS in Orange County, Calif., flying the Crusader.  He completed a Far East tour aboard the carrier USS Lexington. He logged many carrier landings and visited many foreign lands. Upon his return to the United States, he married his sweetheart, Harriet "Hattie" Heath.  He left the Marines in 1966 as a major after a 13-month combat tour in Da Nang, South Vietnam.  Cliff was a pilot with Delta Air Lines for 30 years and logged more than 22,000 hours of flight time before retiring in 1996. He was widowed after 55 years of marriage to his best girl.  He and Hattie were blessed with two fine children. Other survivors include his four grandchildren. He was a member of numerous organizations including The Jamestowne Society, the Friday Breakfast Bunch, The Old Guard of the Gate City Guard, The Quiet Birdmen, Sons of the American Revolution, and the Tuesday Pilots.  He and Harriet were founding members of The Episcopal Church of Saint Peter and Saint Paul in Marietta, Ga. Cliff requested that there be no memorial service or funeral.  Cliff also requested that all friends raise a toast to The World's Luckiest Man. He is reported to have said that, given the chance, he'd do it all over again but would fly faster and higher next time. In lieu of flowers, donations are suggested for his favorite charity: St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital, 501 St. Jude’s Place, Memphis, TN 38105-1905.

**Editor:** There is a detailed story about Cliff in the Stories of Interest-Tales of Aviation page on this website.