FAITH

Tim Collins' latest flight mission is shaping students at Walsh U

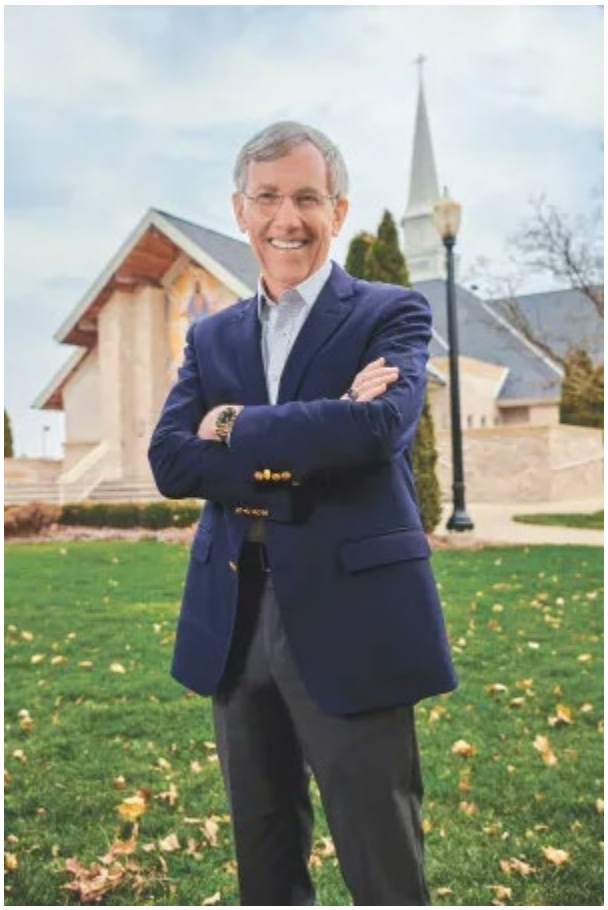


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NORTH CANTON – Long before he became president of Walsh University, Tim Collins was an airman.



The retired Air Force colonel and Chicago native who arrived at Walsh in 2019 served 23 years as a U.S. Air Force command pilot on all seven continents. He saw combat in the Middle East, where he was awarded numerous commendations, including a Purple Heart.

Collins spoke to The Canton Repository about his military career as Veterans Day approaches on Nov. 11.

"I was only 16 when I graduated from high school (in Atlanta), but I was too young to go to the academy at West Point, which was what I had wanted to do," he said. "So my father said, 'What's the plan?' And I said, I'm gonna go to the University of Georgia, and I'm going to get older, and I'm going to get a little college, and then I'm going to go to West Point."

Collins laughed recalling how he informed his father of his intent to attend the University of Georgia, based on what he thought was an authoritative source.

"I said, 'It's the No. 1 school in the South, Dad.' He said, 'Well, who said that?' I said, Playboy magazine. My father says, 'Let me tell you, my 16-year-old is not going to the University of Georgia,' so, he sent me to an Army military junior college in Marysville, Georgia. My second year, I had appointments to all the academies."

Collins earned an associate degree in engineering from Georgia Military College, which named him a Distinguished Alumnus in 2022.

Collins said he decided against a career in the Army or the Navy.

"I thought to myself, you know, this is fun, doing all this Army stuff when I'm 17 years old, but do I want to do this at 30?" he recalled. "So I said, I don't want to go to the Army, and I don't want to be on a boat for six months, so I'm gonna go to the Air Force."

Tim Collins' flying experience

You name the military aircraft, Collins can fly it. He's flown the A-10 Thunderbolt II, the Lockheed U-2 spy plane and the F-16 made famous in "Top Gun."

"A lot of people won't go because it's a 10-year commitment once you finish," he said of fighter pilot training. "But we all know 10 years is nothing. But to a 17-year-old or a 25-year-old, that looks like forever."

In addition to completing the Air Force Academy, Collins earned a master's degree in aeronautical science from Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, a master's from the National War College, and a doctorate in education from Benedictine University.

His numerous missions included Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm. He also occupied operational and staff positions in the U.S. Europe and Asia and commanded at the flight, squadron, group and wing levels.



"I was flying F-16s in an Army Ranger unit," he said. "There are three Ranger battalions in America, and they alternate. So, they sent me to the one in Savannah because it's the only unit in the Army where there are Air Force fighter pilots embedded in the unit."

Collins said that during a mission in Southern Iraq, he had a revelation.

"It's literally the middle of the night, and the way the Army Rangers travel, there's no vehicles; you walk everywhere," he explained. "We're on this 30-mile march with all of our stuff ... and I'm looking up at all these stars and I realize I'm 30. The good Lord has a sense of humor because when I was 17, I said, 'This isn't exactly what I don't want to do.'"

As a fighter pilot, Collins logged more than 4,000 flying hours, including 260 in combat.

His military honors include Aerial Achievement medals, Air medals, the Aircrew Safety Award of Distinction, the Bronze Star, Defense Superior Service Medal, the Legion of Merit, and the Purple Heart.



Prior to Walsh, Collins joined the Johns Hopkins University Applied Physics Laboratory in 2005, where he holds a lifetime appointment on the laboratory's principal professional staff.

He also served as chair for both the Technical Management and Engineering Management graduate degree and certificate programs as a faculty member in the Johns Hopkins Whiting School of Engineering. As the nation's largest university-affiliated research center, the laboratory performs research and development on behalf of the Department of Defense, NASA and other federal agencies

Collins noted that military families like his wife, Drenda, and three children, rarely get the credit they deserve, even though they too, serve. He noted that his children were the "new kids" at the start of nearly every school year of their childhood.



Tim Collins' faith grows stronger

A parishioner of St. Paul Catholic Church in North Canton, Collins entered the Catholic religious Order of St. John of Jerusalem (Order of Malta) in 2025. His public investiture as a Knight of Magisterial Grace was performed by Timothy Cardinal Dolan of New York.

Collins said that like many people, his faith grew as he did.

"My Catholic faith was there, but I was probably like every other 17-year-old; I mean, I went to church because, you know, my parents made me go to church," he said.

"I never thought of religious life or anything like that. My faith was there, but I actually looked at (the military) more as an opportunity to serve. My father had, and my grandfathers had served. I



would say that by the time I was mid-career, my faith had definitely emerged as an important part. This other aspect of my life, the Catholic tradition of going to Mass every day became something very much a part of me."

He credits God for sparing him from serious injury during a deadly incident in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, in 1996.

"The truck-bombing attack at Khobar Towers," he said. "I was in command. The truck bomb went off on the 25th of June. It's this big apartment building and the whole face was ripped off."

The complex, located near King Abdulaziz Air Base in the country's Eastern Province, housed American Air Force personnel. Nineteen were killed and hundreds, including Collins, were injured.

"That has been very much a defining moment because I had 19 people around me that died; half my unit was injured," Collins said.

"I don't know why I wasn't killed. I'm like, why did I survive this, and they didn't? It's just been a question mark ever since then. Obviously, whatever there must be a reason, so I've been trying to be faithful to try to understand what that reason is."

Collins said he believes Catholic church teachings and military service are compatible, noting that officers are required to study the Just War Theory.

"I think it aligns very closely," he said. "The Catholic tradition, we have a strong belief in patriotism and fellow citizens and helping others that maybe aren't as fortunate as we are. The military is about serving others, coming together for something bigger than all of us together, so it aligns."

Collins: Higher education is a 'leadership laboratory'

Barb Yingling, president of Walsh's board of directors, said Collins applies his vast leadership skills and deep sense of devotion and service to the presidency.

"He continues his legacy of service through education, faith and leadership," she said. "His values guided him through his military career, and in his commitment in preparing future generations. He's led with purpose and integrity and service to others."

Yingling said Collins' connection to the students is unlike one she's ever seen. On the Walsh campus, Collins is not a desk jockey but an active leader. Still fighting trim, he often can be seen leading Walsh's "Swords Up! " chant at student events.

"I've never seen anything like it," Yingling said.



Collins is part of a growing contingent of college and university presidents who also are veterans.

"I think there's several advantages any organization has with a veteran," he said. "The military does a really good job of disciplining us and orienting us on mission. In leading a university, the president has to own the mission and try to understand how all these different aspects of university life directly impact the mission."

Collins said veterans are able to make the tough decisions.

"In higher ed, one of the hardest problems we have is in making a decision," he said. "I remember during my interview process, the vice chair asked me, 'Can you say no to people?' We don't want to make the decision, we don't want to say, no, but sometimes you have to say, no; we just can't please everybody all the time. You can do that without being dismissive."



Former Marine Sgt. Joshua Ruiz, director of Veterans Affairs at Walsh, said their students have no better advocate than Collins.

"He is who he is, that's not a facade," Ruiz said. "The energy, the genuine interest in the students and the positive attitude. That's who he is. He really brings, I don't want to say a sense of urgency, but a lot of motivation for the campus, to want it to be better."

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