



Jeff Latas

A Short Biography



Middle Class Origins and Education

Jeff Latas was born in 1958 in Wichita, Kansas. His father was a teacher who couldn't make ends meet teaching, so he became a stillman in an oil refinery and joined the union. Jeff's mother worked in clerical jobs while raising her family in a modest, two-bedroom home. Jeff played football at East High and at Wichita State University. After moving to Tucson in 1978, he worked as a carpenter, ranch hand, and service station attendant to pay his way through Pima College and the University of Arizona where he earned his aerospace engineering degree. The Tucson Fire Department gave Jeff an award for saving a woman's life. He later earned a Master's degree in Public Administration.

Distinguished 20-Year Military Career

Jeff was commissioned into the U.S. Air Force. After pilot training at Columbus Air Force Base, Mississippi, he flew F-111s at Cannon Air Force Base, New Mexico. Later, at Laughlin Air Force Base in Texas, his students voted him "Outstanding Instructor." He also served there as evaluator of local first responders. Jeff was one of the first pilots to fly the F-15E "Strike Eagle." In 1990, he was sent to Oman and later Saudi Arabia with the Rocketeers in support of Operation Desert Shield. He led a 10-ship formation into heavy fire and was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for heroism. Jeff flew 38 official combat missions and in 1993 was named the Rocketeers' Top Gun. He returned to Saudi Arabia twice in support of Operation Southern Watch.

Jeff next went to the Pentagon, where he managed requirements for weapon modernization programs. He argued against the use of depleted uranium weapons, and supported systems (now produced in Tucson) that could disable enemy weapons while minimizing injuries to people. Jeff was a member of the original Quadrennial Defense Review. He returned to the Middle East in support of Operation Southern Watch in Kuwait and Operation Northern Watch in Turkey. He returned to his beloved southern Arizona and served at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base in Tucson until retirement. Jeff's exemplary military record also includes nearly 5,000 hours in fighter aircraft, four Air Medals, four Meritorious Service Medals, and nine Aerial Achievement Medals. His experience in the Middle East and the Pentagon convinced him that the war in Iraq was wrong and was being badly mishandled, and he is an outspoken advocate of bringing the troops home quickly and safely.

Commitment to the Public Schools

As a product of public schools, Jeff supported them as a volunteer, becoming a founding member of the Communities in Schools program in Wayne County NC, that ran the Teen Health Corps at Goldsboro High School, a supplemental reading program, and other tutoring and mentoring programs. Later, he was PTA President at Shreveewood Elementary School in Falls Church, Virginia. He is committed to strengthening the public schools.

The Latas Family

Upon retiring in 2002, Jeff was immediately hired as a pilot by JetBlue Airways. A lifelong Democrat, Jeff now lives in Oro Valley with Salette, his wife of nearly 26 years, who is also a U of A graduate, owns a small business, and has long volunteered in animal welfare, child welfare, and peace organizations. Daughter Virginia completed her studies at the University of Arizona and works as a veterinary technician. Son Jesse graduated from Canyon del Oro High School, attended Pima College and the U of A, and was medically evacuated from Iraq last year where he was serving as a soldier. He is currently recovering from a stem cell transplant.

For more information
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