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Continental United States NORAD Region – First Air Force (Air Forces Northern)
Office of Public Affairs

1210 Beacon Beach Road * Tyndall AFB FL 32403-5549
(850) 283-8080 * FAX (850) 283-3376 * DSN 523-8080

afnorthpa@tyndall.af.mil * www.1af.acc.af.mil * [twitter@1staf](https://twitter.com/1staf) * [Facebook@AmericasAOC](https://www.facebook.com/AmericasAOC)

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From H.S. dropout to fighter pilot: Air Force officer to retire

By Carol Carpenter, AFNORTH Public Affairs

TYNDALL AIR FORCE BASE, Fla. – Sometimes when life deals you a significant, life-altering blow, it's hard to rebound in a positive way.

But Col. Michael Hare, who is preparing to retire this month from a long, distinguished and quite diverse Air Force career, ultimately responded well to one of life's serious upsets—the tragic death of his father when Michael was just 16.

The teenager not only survived the devastating experience, he was eventually able to understand that despite it, he could still move forward in a constructive manner.

And in a twist of irony, had his father survived his illness, Michael would have ultimately been disqualified for future military service. Confused? Read on.

Serving as the National Security Emergency Preparedness director for Continental U.S. NORAD Region - 1st Air Force (Air Forces Northern), Colonel Hare recalls the events surrounding his father's death in 1972. He tells the story with a deep sense of sadness and profound loss.

His father, who had developed total kidney failure, was hooked to a home dialysis machine. Doctors told his family that the best long-term solution would be for him to receive a donated kidney. Luckily and happily, his teenage son Michael's kidney was a perfect match.

Michael had had been helping his mother provide routine care for his gravely ill father, and was ecstatic at the thought that he could also give his beloved parent this special gift.

However, just before the operation was to take place, the senior Mr. Hare developed pneumonia, leaving the ailing patient too weak for the procedure. Unable to recover, he died before getting Michael's kidney.

Broken hearted and so deeply depressed that he dropped out of high school, Michael didn't know then that he would never have been able to join any branch of the military if he had given up one of those vital organs.



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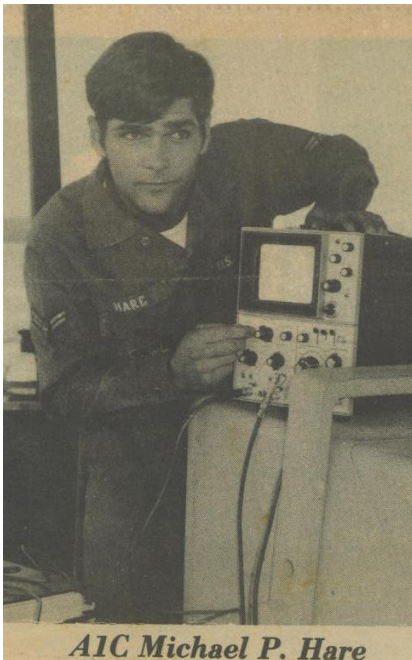
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“I’ve always been torn over that,” Colonel Hare said. “Given the choice between having this wonderful Air Force career or my dad, I’d take my dad in a heartbeat. But God does strange things and sometimes blessings come in hard ways.”

And his Air Force career has, indeed, blessed—and challenged—him in a multitude of ways. Like anyone who has spent several decades building and enjoying a meaningful career, he leaves the Air Force with many lasting memories, mostly good ones, sprinkled with only a few that aren’t.

Among his varied experiences include earning a college degree, working with countless Air Force friends and colleagues, traveling around the world and learning new and rewarding career skills, including becoming a fighter pilot, his deepest passion.

He also managed to find time for marriage, children and various personal endeavors, including becoming an expert skydiver.



The NSEP director began his Air Force career in 1975 as a young enlisted Airman, working in air traffic control radar maintenance. Eventually, growing restless, he developed an intense desire to become a fighter pilot, which would require a college degree and attending Officer Training School.

The degree came first, and he worked diligently to accumulate college credits, mostly while stationed in Germany.

Becoming increasingly excited at the prospect of flying a fighter jet, he recalls two incidents in 1980 that momentarily deflated his high hopes of achieving that lofty goal. After filling out paperwork for OTS, he met with his commander, section supervisor and first sergeant for a stressful interview that was required for acceptance into the rigorous and highly competitive program.

“After the interview, the commander thanked me for my time and said, ‘I cannot recommend you; I don’t think you have what it takes to be an Air Force officer,’” Colonel Hare related of that unexpected comment.

Stunned but only momentarily speechless, the young staff sergeant took a deep breath and responded, “Sir, you are wrong; I absolutely do have what it takes!”

The commander then smiled and responded, “Good, that’s what I wanted to hear.” He signed the application on the spot.

After OTS, the newly commissioned second lieutenant trained in the A-10 Thunderbolt in Royal Air Force Bentwaters, England, where he enjoyed the boisterous camaraderie of fellow pilots.

By the late 1980s he thought he might be ready to end his military career in favor of life as a civilian, accepting a pilot job with Northwest Airlines in Minneapolis. He also found a position with the Air National Guard in Peoria, Ill., flying the A-37 Dragonfly on a part-time basis.

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A few years later, he became a member of the 148th Fighter Wing in Duluth, Minn., an aligned ANG unit with CONR-1st Air Force. He also continued to fly as a civilian pilot.

What happened next changed the 148th FW's mission in a drastic way—the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. “We were called on repeatedly to set up and stand alert at places that traditionally hadn't had air defense,” Colonel Hare said of that momentous time.

In 2003 he was asked by the Adjutant General to do a 120-day tour at NORAD Headquarters in Colorado Springs, Colo.

With the experience gained at NORAD, his next assignment landed him at Tyndall, working as a Battle Commander for 1st Air Force.

Around the same time, he joined the Air Force Reserve and became South Dakota's Emergency Preparedness Liaison Officer, a position that is part of AFNSEP's Defense Support of Civil Authorities mission.

His last career move was to become AFNSEP's director, a position he has held for two-plus years. He is proud to have directed the EPLO program, which provides response to hurricanes and other natural and man-made disasters, including the recent earthquake relief operations in Haiti.

Recently married, he and his new wife, Mary, his four stepchildren and their Irish Setter will reside in Gainesville, Fla. He looks forward to renovating their home there, skydiving with a competitive team and possibly resuming his civilian piloting career.

Of his 34-year military career he stated with pride and gratitude: “I came to the Air Force as a high school dropout hoping to learn a skill and get some kind of education. The Air Force gave me unlimited opportunity and trust; I could not have asked for anything more.”

