

Who was Val Bourque?

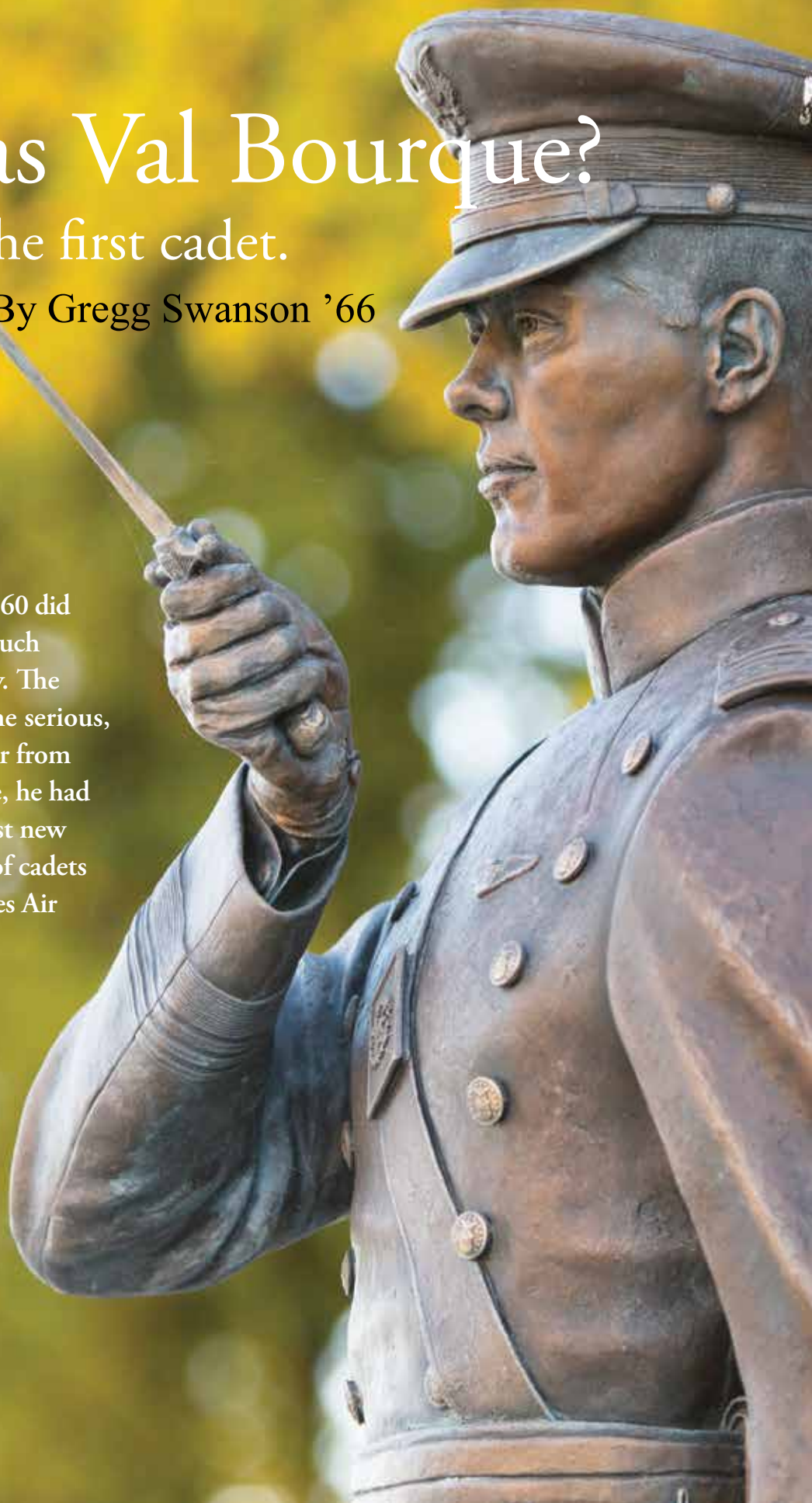
The story of the first cadet.

By Gregg Swanson '66

July 11, 1955

**Lowry AFB,
Denver, Colorado**

VAL Bourque '60 did not get much sleep, and he was in a hurry. The athletic 18-year-old with the serious, alert eyes had never been far from Massachusetts. All the same, he had decided he would be the first new cadet in the first-ever class of cadets at the fledgling United States Air Force Academy.





At 4:30 a.m., over an hour before sunrise, he stepped into the silent, imposing hallway of a World War II era military office building. A friend back in South Hadley Falls knew a sergeant at the Lowry personnel office, so upon landing at the old Stapleton airport, Val had looked him up, and—after an all too short night—accompanied him to Patrick Hall for Inprocessing. True to his hopes, Cadet

Valmore William Bourque was indeed the first in line.

By 3 p.m. that day, the 306 members of the Class of 1959 had new haircuts, new uniforms, and some very basic drill instruction. This quick transformation was completed just in time for the Academy dedication ceremony that featured speeches, lots of USAF brass, a dramatic low altitude flyby of bombers and fighters, and Walter Cronkite doing the TV coverage. Yes, those 306 lives had abruptly and certainly changed.

Val Bourque came from a working class family—his father a factory employee, his mother in meat packing. Conditioned by a family ethic of hard work and discipline, Val found both excitement and recreation in the outdoors, often rushing home from school, grabbing a rifle, and racing to the nearby woods to hunt rabbits and pheasant. His USAFA application lists many activities, but only one hobby: hunting. “A true sportsman,” states his high school yearbook. *But his dream was to fly.*

Val’s first big educational break came when a high school English teacher recognized his genuine potential, and helped arrange a one-year scholarship at a nearby prep school. Inspired by its academic and sports programs, Val caught the attention of the headmaster, who personally helped with his college application, on the theory that Val would excel in the military and would have a good chance of admission to the new institution. The strategy worked, and Val received a congressional appointment.

That same spring, a scout from the Pittsburgh Pirates watched Val play shortstop, and shortly thereafter made him an offer to play in the Pirates’ organization. His father arrived at practice with the team telegraph in hand, and was furious when the coach informed him that Val had

decided on USAFA. From that point, Val was not turning back. Decisive and determined, he had committed to the U.S. Air Force, and did so without his family’s blessing.

The Class of 1959 had a demanding but exhilarating summer that challenged them every waking moment, but rewarded them with a sense of unity and purpose. Living in modified barracks at Lowry Air Force Base, and supervised by a 66-officer cadre of select Air Training Officers, they underwent rigorous, unforgiving training during that very first “doolie” summer. Val fit in well; classmates remember him as being universally liked and very enthusiastic.

1955-1960

Lowry Air Force Base and the New Academy Campus

Not until the academic year began did Val hit his first speed bump. His earlier education had not fully prepared him for the intense Academy academics, and he was on academic probation in short order. Nevertheless, he played both soccer and baseball, studying furiously in every spare moment while dealing with the unceasing pressures of doolie year.

As a starter on the first soccer team, Val was a whirlwind on the field, exhibiting contagious energy and a can-do spirit. In the spring, as USAFA’s first starting shortstop, he excelled and sometimes even offered a bit of coaching.

Classmate Jim Carpenter ’59 recalls one such episode. “Val tried to get me to pitch the baseball,” Carpenter says, “even giving me some lessons on throwing a knuckle ball because my hands were oversized—hopeless!”

Late in his sophomore year, Val’s academic situation had become dire, and he went before an academic board. No doubt his determination showed, for the board gave him another chance. Even so, Val was washed back to the Class of ’60, along with 17 other classmates, to repeat some courses. Another “first” in a sense—but he had a goal, and he quietly vowed to reach it.

Bourque was always serious, always focused. He did not have many close friends, but everyone respected him for his diligence and character. Despite his tenacity, classmates remember that he didn’t respond well to tutoring.

“Val had to learn things in his own way,” says Denis Walsh ’60, Val’s roommate of two years. “He was hanging by a thread all the time, academically. No one was tested more than Val was. But he was at the very top in character and honor.”

His Air Officer Commanding in Sixth Squadron, a spit-and-polish former first captain at West Point, called Val in: “We’re moving you to a different squadron, Cadet Bourque, so you can get a fresh start.” Val was having none of it.

“I’m not staying at the Academy if I’m not staying in 6th Squadron,” was his response. Amazingly, Val prevailed. He was one of the few (possibly the only one in his class)

The first Air Force Academy cadet, Valmore W. Bourque, was sworn in early on July 11, 1955.



Bourque played soccer and baseball while attending the Academy.

to spend his extended five-year cadet career in one squadron.

“He was an All-American guy,” says Walsh. “He looked like a recruiting poster.”

At the Permanent Installation, June Week 1960 and Early Assignments

In the summer of 1959, now transplanted at the shiny new installation in the shadow of the Rampart Range, Val agreed to a blind date where he met Linda Jewett, who held a summer job in the Academy admissions office at the time. Purposeful and earnest as ever, Bourque did not waste time on their first date. Linda remembers one particular question he asked that evening:

“What are you going to name your first daughter?” Val and Linda were married two years later.

On June 3rd, nearly five years after entering the Academy, Val and 226 members of the Class of 1960 graduated and began their Air Force adventures. The first stop for Val and Linda was undergraduate pilot training, followed by assignment to the 11th Aeromedical Transport Squadron at Scott Air Force Base, Illinois, where Val flew the C-131 “Samaritan” medical evacuation transport aircraft for two years. During this tour, their daughter was born. She was named Wendy Sue by the happy couple.

1963-64

Tan Son Nhut Airbase, South Vietnam

By 1963, the government and military of South Vietnam were barely in control of the country. Over

15,000 American “advisors” were in Southeast Asia to defeat the insurgency. Like many young pros with wings, Val did not want to miss this developing conflict, and he volunteered to go. His enroute assignment was the 309th Airlift Squadron, then training at Pope Air Force Base, N.C. in the C-123 Fairchild “Provider.”

With the box-like structure of an air frame originally designed as a glider, and a cruise speed of 140 knots, the C-123 could not be considered a glamorous aircraft, but its two large reciprocating propeller engines and rugged design made it well suited for operations on short and unimproved airstrips, which was the norm for air resupply operations in Vietnam.

C-123 missions were never routine, and the flying was dangerous. The first USAF aircraft lost in Vietnam was in fact a C-123, in 1962. This “distinction” was followed by a long list of crashes, runway accidents, and losses to hostile fire. Some missions were highly classified; one accident record states simply that “Mystery surrounds this crash.” And another concludes: “Crew member fell out with the load.”

There were night missions to dispense flares over ground targets, VIP flights for U.S. and Vietnamese officials, and sometimes long flights around Cambodia to Thailand. In-flight malfunctions and incidents were common; in heavy rain the C-123 would leak, with several inches of water accumulating in the cabin and causing serious weight and balance problems.

The 309th was based at Tan Son Nhut, the sprawling main airbase near Saigon. The U.S. presence was outgrowing the base in those early days; C-123 aircrews were lodged in the city, despite the frequent Viet Cong attacks in the area.

Nels Delisanti ’60, Val’s classmate and fellow C-123 pilot in a sister unit, the 310th Squadron, said that the aircrews “loved the C-123—it was a ball to fly.” There

was no autopilot and 1950s-era cockpit technology, which meant real seat-of-the-pants flying.

Often the crews and aircraft were deployed for several days at a time to bases “up country”: Nha Trang on the central coast, Danang in the north, near the DMZ, sometimes close to some of the hardest fighting. C-123 crews delivered supplies of every description, including livestock “on the hoof,” to rudimentary bases around the country, some with runways less than 2000 feet long. Their Vietnamese military passengers often deployed with their families and animals, and occasionally attempted to start cooking fires in the cargo hold.

“We would land on the dirt strip, spin 180 degrees around and gun the engines, then look to see who was coming out of the trees,” Delisanti says of the small airfields. “If it was the friendlies, we would shove the load out and take off. And we were never sure it would be the friendlies.”

Low altitude airdrops were used to resupply the small, vulnerable “alpha bases,” or fire support camps, bulldozed on hilltops and in valleys throughout Vietnam. The hazards of these airdrops were many, but the Army and allied troops depended upon them for survival.

Another C-123 pilot, Ken Thompson '59, has vivid memories of “valleys surrounded by fairly high mountains,” which were often hidden in wet gray clouds. Pilots would descend through “sucker holes” to get below the clouds and look for the right camp.

“There were no navigation aids at the camps, and the maps we had were from the days of the French occupation and very outdated,” Thompson recalls.

Jim Bujalski '60, a classmate who arrived a month before Val, describes a fast paced operational tempo with as many as 15 sorties in one day, flown by mixed crews from both squadrons. The pace, the unpredictable flight conditions, and the combat demands of these missions required tireless vigilance, teamwork, and unit esprit and camaraderie.

“We flew hard, and we played hard,” remembers Bujalski. As always, Val was a popular figure in both squadrons, displaying outstanding airmanship and “a fantastic attitude.” He was soon checked out in the left seat, as aircraft commander, solidifying his reputation as a superb pilot.

October 24, 1964

Quang Duc Province, South Vietnam

Val had been “in country” for almost a year, the standard crew rotation point, and it was nearing time to go



Members of the 309th and 310th at Tan Son Nhut Air Base give full military honors to First Lieutenant Valmore Bourque and the other seven personnel who died on October 24, 1964 when their C-123 was shot down. Lt. Bourque was promoted to Captain posthumously.

home. He had orders to Travis AFB in hand, and was counting the days.

While flying from Nha Trang, the squadron was given a three-ship resupply mission to airdrop ammunition to a Special Forces camp in a known hot spot, the “Parrot’s Beak” near the Cambodian border north of Saigon. An experienced flight examiner was scheduled to lead the mission, but Val, determined as always, wanted one more challenge, and persuaded the more senior officer to let him take the lead. A classmate, Capt. Gary Crew '60, was in the second aircraft.

Pilots are trained to use visual reference points on the ground for precise navigation, but the terrain in the central hills of Vietnam often lacked prominent features. From the air, through the low scud and fog that covered the hilltops, the ground appears as an intermittent mosaic of dark green, interspersed with fields and an occasional dirt road. Villages look alike. International borders are invisible. The pilot must descend, using guts and guile, to get a closer look.

The accounts from the crew of the second aircraft indicate that Val descended and was close to the assigned camp, Bu Prang, a short distance from the border. But the triangular fire bases could easily be confused, and in confirming the correct airdrop target, his aircraft strayed too close to the Viet Cong sanctuary in Cambodia. Hit in the right engine by antiaircraft fire, Val’s C-123 went down near the border with its crew of six and two U.S. Army personnel. There were no survivors.

November 5, 1964

Air Force Academy Cemetery

On a cool, breezy morning under cloudless skies, Val Bourque was laid to rest, the eighth graduate to be interred at the Academy, and the first who was killed in action. The Catholic chaplain conducted the graveside service.

The Air Force had posthumously promoted him to the rank of captain. His daughter was only two years old when he died. Val was 28. ▷

Linda was presented Val's third, fourth, and fifth oak leaf clusters to the Air Medal. Six members of his class were pallbearers, and there was an honor guard of 24 cadets from Sixth Squadron, representing the Cadet Wing and the many graduates who knew him so well.


2014


Air Force Academy, Colorado

As they have since 1960, the Cadet Wing forms up on the Terrazzo and marches toward the parade ground, down the ramp that then proclaimed "Bring Me Men." Awaiting them at the Mall of Heroes, directly below the Sixth Squadron cadet area, are the life size bronze figures of three graduates who died in Southeast Asia: Lt. Karl Richter '64, Capt. Lance Sijan '65, and Capt. Valmore Bourque.

As the cadets pass, each squadron executes an "eyes right" and "present arms," in salute to the three war heroes. In the center is Val Bourque, in cadet parade uniform. Silently he returns the Wing's salute, saber aloft, and the squadrons march on.

Between the warriors' memorial and the cadets is a bond that may be understood in many ways. Perhaps the cadets are reminded that they too are committing to be warriors, to the profession of arms. Perhaps they wonder about the lives of these men, only a few years older than themselves when they earned their wings, graduates who volunteered to fly in that distant, terrible conflict, and who served with honor and courage.

But the cadets will not see the 179 other graduates also reviewing their passing ranks, the fallen warriors listed on the Academy's War Memorial wall who died in combat in Asia, Iran, the Balkans, Iraq, Afghanistan, and in the war on terrorism over the last 50 years. They too are returning the salute; they too are honored. The three aviators and their unseen companions powerfully embody today's Air Force mission: to fly, fight, and win. The first in this procession, first in the Long Blue Line, is Val Bourque, a man of character and honor, who wanted above all things to serve his country. 

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