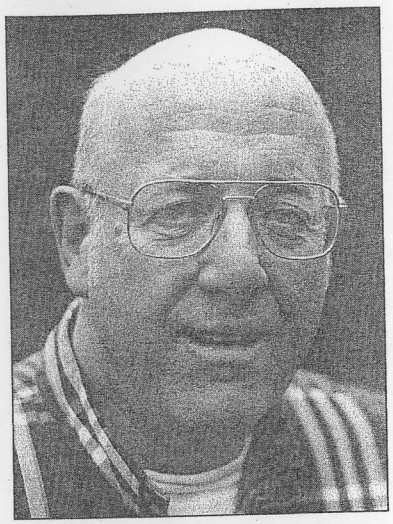
By Robert F. Dorr

Always remember the price



When I ponder the price of freedom, Valmore Bourque stands in my mind as the embodiment of everything Americans have been willing to give when called upon.

In mid-February, while plans shaped up for airstrikes on Iraq, one Washington bigwig after another trotted before television cameras to warn us that there would be a price.

Before the situation was at least temporarily defused, the White House national-security adviser, Sandy Berger, stood in the bright lights and told Americans that military action against Iraq's Saddam Hussein would mean casualties.

The men and women of the armed forces are prepared for this. No one wants to see a single American fall in battle — we have even grown averse to death and injury on the other side — but if it should happen, we will need to remember.

On Oct. 25, 1964, the Air Force lost a promising pilot, 1st Lt. Valmore Bourque, in a region few Americans knew about, in a war that was soon to grow bigger than anyone could guess.

Bourque belonged to the 309th Troop Carrier Squadron at Saigon, capital of a country where 14,000 Americans were caught up in one of several obscure brush-fire wars raging around the world. He was pilot of a C-123B Provider, a propeller-driven transport used to haul supplies to the South Vietnamese army.

I think of Bourque when the price of war is pondered. He was from South Hadley Falls, Mass., and was active in baseball, soccer and skiing. He was regarded as a superb pilot and officer but not a scholastic genius. He was the kind of American you'd want living next door and the kind you'd want standing with you in a fight.

In 1964, Vietnam was an adventure where oddball characters flew old planes in the exotic Orient. As is often the case, ordinary-looking transports were doing the hard work.

Retired Maj. Robert Thorpe of Clinton, Wis., who flew with Bourque, remembered that "we would have a beer on the sixth floor of the Rex Hotel, look out across the Saigon River and see fighting in the distance." Bourque spoke of his dream to fly executive transports at Andrews Air Force Base, Md., near Washington, D.C.

The squadron was temporarily moved to Nha Trang. As Thorpe remembered, "We were working for Army special forces, resupplying satellite camps." The C-123Bs were dropping supplies by parachute in a region where much of the ground was controlled by hostile Viet Cong guerrillas.

'It was Bourque's turn'

"It was our third mission of the day," Thorpe recalled. "Bourque's aircraft had been hit" by small-arms fire on the first two. The job of leading the formation was rotated among pilots and it was Bourque's turn. "We were dodging thunderstorms and making bundle drops near the Cambodian border when we spotted a place on the ground that appeared to be our drop zone.

"He made a dry pass," flying over the drop zone to check wind conditions and to verify the location. Neither Bourque nor Thorpe realized that they were in the wrong place. Bourque signalled that he was prepared to make the airdrop. "He opened the ramp and that was when he was hit. He went into a right turn and crashed. There were eight Americans on his airplane, including two Army special-forces men."

Thorpe remembered that "we saw no flames, no flash." Hollywood loves fiery explosions, but in real life aircraft usually crash with a dry, rending clump.

Later, it was apparent that the C-123B formation had strayed into Cambodia — a country the United States would bomb later but with which it was not then involved. The United States acknowledged the error in a statement repeated in the Oct. 30, 1964, edition of the newspaper Stars & Stripes. Bourque went down 300 yards from the Cambodian border.

Sadly, there is not enough space on this page to pay tribute to the other Americans aboard the C-123B or to the 58,000 more who perished later in Vietnam. But when I ponder the price of freedom, Valmore Bourque stands in my mind as the embodiment of everything Americans have been willing to give when called upon.

Bourque was my age. In high school, his goal — like mine — was to be accepted into the first class at the new Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, Colo. Unlike me, he made it.

He was the first person to take the oath as a cadet at the academy July 11, 1955. Academic troubles prevented him from graduating with the academy's first class in 1959, but he did graduate with the class of 1960. He flew with the 11th Aeromedical Squadron at McGuire Air Force Base, N.J., before going to Vietnam. He was, as Thorpe remembered, "a fine man and a fine officer."

I wish we had a granite wall a thousand miles long on which we could chisel in mile-high letters the name of every American who paid the ultimate price, as Bourque did. Should we ever forget, even for a moment, we will deserve our fate.

Some in Air Force blue may remember Bourque for another reason. He was the first graduate of the academy to die in combat.

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By Leslie Smith

For annoyance, there's Tricare

original question of "why?" How much money