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‘WAR COSTS PEOPLE’: VIETNAM VET, ACADEMY GRAD HONORS CLASSMATES KILLED IN ACTION

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

ACADEMY GRADUATE BURIED-----Capt. Valmore W. Bourque, first Air Force Academy graduate killed in action, was buried with full military honors Thursday at the Academy's cemetery. Pallbearers -- classmates of Captain Bourque -- carry the coffin by an honor guard of 24 cadets from the 6th Cadet Squadron, the unit to which the captain was assigned during his years at the Academy. Captain Bourque died Oct. 24 in Viet Nam.

(Air Force Photo)

(Graphic courtesy of Andrew Biancur)

Story by Jennifer Spradlin, May 24, 2019

U.S. AIR FORCE ACADEMY, Colo. — Every year on Memorial Day, Andrew Biancur and his wife visit the Air Force Academy Cemetery.

He holds a bucket full of soapy water while his wife kneels and cleans each gravestone from the graduating class of 1960. She never lets him help, although he’s often offered, because she says he’s done his part. Biancur is the first Academy graduate to see combat in Vietnam.

Once the stones are cleaned, the two leave flowers for each man and head home, but Biancur’s effort to preserve the memory of fallen Airmen extends far beyond the annual holiday. He oversees an online database dedicated to Academy graduates killed in combat.

“We no longer have a Memorial Day parade in every small town in the United States to honor those people,” Biancur said. “There aren’t as many people to honor — WWII was half the town, but now you’re honoring one person per 7,000 … that’s a more difficult task.”

The database is home to letters, newspaper articles, photographs and military documents detailing the service and deaths of the 187 graduates killed since the opening years of the Vietnam War. Citing stricter privacy laws enacted in the 1970s, Biancur said it was important to collect and post this information for subsequent Academy classes and the public.

He has personally scanned more than 100,000 pages into the database, including information on one of his Academy soccer teammates Capt. Valmore “Val” Bourque. Bourque was the first cadet sworn into the Academy and the first graduate killed in combat.

“He was a damn good friend, I think, to anybody who knew him,” he said. “On the soccer field, I can tell you we had games when we could have been down two goals with 10 seconds to go, and we still believed we could win, and Val was leading the charge. He’d say, ‘Come on, come on, we can win this.’ He just had a focus and intensity about him.”

Bourque came from a poor background but excelled in sports, especially baseball. His widow, Linda, shared in a letter to Biancur how Bourque learned about his appointment to the Academy.

“One day he was playing as a shortstop, and a scout from the Pittsburgh Pirates was watching him play. He offered him a contract that day. But partway through the game, his father came with a telegraph from the Air Force Academy that he was accepted,” she wrote. “He said he had to look on the map to find out where [Colorado] was.”

After Bourque graduated from the Academy, he went to pilot school. In October 1964, he was piloting a C-123 with supplies for the Army in the mountains north of Saigon when he was shot down. A second C-123 on the mission also took fire but was able to return to their base.

At the time, Linda had been married to Val for three years. They had a two-year-old daughter. She told local newspapers that her husband was “a career Air Force officer, ready to do what came his way” despite the risk to his life.

Bourque’s body was recovered and interred at the Academy. His loss, while not shocking to Biancur, was deeply felt due to the closeness of his graduating class.

“He was killed at the end of October, and I probably heard about it in November. We didn’t have an Association of Graduates back then so the word didn’t come out directly, but it trickled out pretty quickly,” he said. “We knew when we came here that war costs people, all of us having been alive during World War II, having lost an uncle or in my case, a father. We didn’t know we were going into combat that soon after graduating, but we knew what we came here to do, and that was serve our country.”

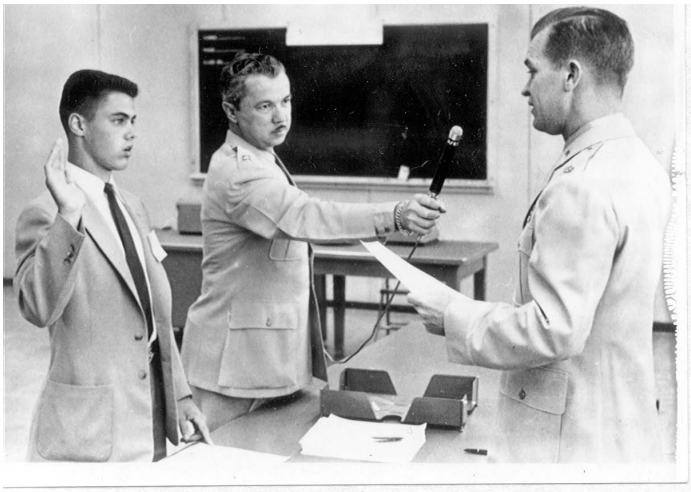
Biancur and his wife will be back at the cemetery this year for Memorial Day, although with the weather, they’re not sure how much snow will be obscuring the gravestones. He’s also working with Cadet Squadron 6 to establish a memorial for Bourque.

Visit memwall.usafalibrary.com to learn more about Academy grads killed in action.

More photos

(Photo courtesy of Andrew Biancur)

Capt. Valmore “Val” Bourque, a 1960 Air Force Academy grad. He was the first cadet sworn into the Academy and the first cadet to be killed in action.



The first Air Force Academy cadet, Valmore W. Bourke, was sworn in at 4:30 a.m. July 11, 1955. As Captain Bourke, he was killed in action Oct. 24, 1964, while flying a resupply mission in South Vietnam--the first Air Force Academy graduate to be killed in combat.

(Graphic courtesy of Andrew Biancur