My first assignment after flight school was the C-131 aircraft in the 13th Aeromedical Transport Squadron (AMTS) at Travis AFB, California. Val Borque, who was the first candidate to sign in as a cadet to the Air Force Academy in 1955, subsequently graduated in the Class of 1960, as did I. His first operational assignment was to a similar Aeromedical Transport Squadron in the C-131 at McGuire AFB, New Jersey. Val was later assigned to the 309th Air Commando Squadron flying C-123's at Tan Son Nhut Air Base in Saigon. In late 1964, I was notified that I would be transferred to the 309th after C-123 upgrade training in Florida. Val had follow-on orders to Travis in the 13th AMTS which was essentially a one-for one trade between the two of us. Val's last mission in the C-123 for the 309th was as aircraft commander in the lead aircraft of a two ship cargo airdrop mission at a drop zone near the border North of Saigon. Major Harry Byer was a flight examiner who was originally scheduled to lead the mission in the first aircraft, but Val convinced Harry that he should lead the flight as it was his last mission prior to leaving Viet Nam. Val led the flight to the drop zone which was unfortunately mistaken as a primitive air field in Cambodia occupied by the Viet Cong. As he flew over the suspected drop zone, his aircraft was riddled by ground fire and crashed over the border in South Viet Nam territory, killing all on board. The second aircraft, piloted by Major Byer broke off the drop approach and returned safely to Saigon.

I initially heard of the event while in C-123 transition school at Hurlburt Field at Eglin AFB prior to departing for Saigon. Upon arrival at the 309th, I was checked out for in-country operations by Major Byer. He confirmed what I had heard earlier about Val and provided added details. The tragic event of Val's death as the first combat casualty for an Air Force Academy graduate was ironic as he was also the first candidate to sign in to the newly established Air Force Academy as its first Cadet.