To 59ers,

The recent tragedy of two members of the Class of 2020 taking their own lives has brought out support for the Academy during these trying times. Val Bourque's daughter called to ask me to help her send a message to this graduating class. Despite having the Chief of Staff visit the next day, our Superintendent, Jay Silveria, agreed to have this message delivered to the Class of 2020.

Max

Class of 2020:

On July 11 of 1955, Valmore W. Bourque, Val, woke up at the crack of dawn to be first cadet to enter the U.S. Air Force Academy. At that moment in time, a hero was born who left a story of overcoming his underprivileged life and adversity; developing discipline, strength, and leadership; and paid the ultimate sacrifice by giving his life for his country. This man is my father. I want to share his story today to help others understand his strength during adversity and maybe provide a bit of hope that Val Bourque is with you today.

Val was born in an underprivileged family who immigrated to the United States hoping to find the "American Dream." Throughout his childhood, he mastered the sport of baseball and soccer which landed him free entry to a private High School in Massachusetts. Academic struggles haunted him from the beginning; however, the charming star of the baseball team overcame the obstacles while achieving future opportunities.

During the final baseball game of his senior year, the Pittsburgh Pirates offered him a baseball contract. At the same time, he received a telegram that he had been accepted into the first class, the 59ers, of the United States Air Force Academy. He chose the more difficult route.

Do you remember the pride that first day you entered the academy and walked past a statue of him? Maybe a bit more information can help you find hope at this time. Val was "turned back" after his sophomore year and was devastated that he would not graduate as a 59er. But, the class of 1960 quickly embraced him into their family so that he became a respected member of both classes.

On October 24, 1964, Captain Valmore W Bourque became the first USAFA graduate to be killed in action as he flew a desperate rescue mission in Vietnam to drop supplies to Special Forces. My father was scheduled to come home the next day, but he made the choice to fly this last mission. News headlines stated, "C-123 Pilot is School's First War Casualty," "Air Academy Graduate Died Doing

What He Liked Best," "First AFA Graduate Killed," "Taps Echo Farewell to AFA Graduate," "Never Fell Short of the Best". His commander wrote, "We salute Lieutenant Valmore W. Bourque as a courageous and dedicated hero who fought and died for his country. A man could do no better."

March 21, 2014, my father reached back down to remind us of him. After 50 years, the Air Force had finally reached the crash site on the Vietnam/Cambodia border. They came to my office to deliver his dog tags and a few personal items. Two weeks later, all military members in the plane were buried at Arlington as heroes of our nation. The somber moment of taps reminded me that these men fought for me. They sacrificed their lives for freedom. This moment in time, reminded me that the United States Air Force is my family. They never gave up the search, even after 50 years.

Today's phone call was a plea from this young cadet's mother for me to write my father's story so current cadets struggling to overcome the adversity of this virus may find hope. I know he is with each of you as he reaches down in these mysterious ways to make sure we remember that each of us can overcome difficult situations. He symbolizes strength, persistence, leadership, and honor. As President Trump stated last year, "His fighting spirit lives in each and every one of you."

We are your family. I hope you can see this wonderful USAFA family that forever reaches out with pride. I hope you can follow my father's footsteps and proudly anticipate and courageously overcome the difficult times of today. He is with you as he lies in the Academy cemetery and always looking down at each cadet walking past his statue. He is a symbol of hope.

Wendy Bourque Snider