Chairman, Heritage Committee
Board of Directors
Association of Graduates
United States Air Force Academy
Colorado. 80840

9 November, 2004

Dear Sir:

The graduates of the Classes of 1959 and 1960 of the Air Force Academy request that the airfield at the United States Air Force Academy be named the "Valmore W. Bourque Airfield" in honor of the Captain Valmore W. Bourque. Captain Bourque was the first cadet to take the oath of office as a new cadet in July 1955. Coincidently, he was also the first graduate to lose his life in combat. The attached narrative of his life and career more than adequately describes the reasons for granting this honor.

Val, as a member of both classes, epitomizes all the traits and characteristics essential to make him an outstanding example for every cadet to emulate throughout a career as a cadet and officer.

We ask your favorable consideration of this and support of this nomination.

Respectfully,

Harold W. Todd
Class of 1959

Andrew W. Biancur
Class of 1960

Atch: V. W. Bourque Narrative

Captain Valmore W. "Val" Bourque
23 July 1936 - 24 October 1964

Captain Valmore W. Bourque has the distinction of being the first cadet to enroll in the Air Force Academy in July 1955 and also the first graduate of the school to give his life in combat in October 1964.

Valmore William Bourque was born in Holyoke, Massachusetts to Valmore V. and Cecila Lucey Bourque of South Hadley Falls, Massachusetts on 23 July, 1936. A product of a close family founded on traditional Puritan-Yankee-European ideals, he developed the drive to never give less than his best effort, a trait that characterized Val's life. Adopting a strong work ethic from his "blue collar" family for educational achievements, he grew up with a love for books which was to follow him throughout his life.

He graduated from South Hadley High School in 1954. While there, Val served as vice president of his class, participated in football, basketball, and baseball, and still found time to develop a keen interest in hunting. Praised as "A true sportsman" by his 1954 school yearbook, he went on to attend Williston Academy in East Hampton. Mass. The headmaster at Williston encouraged Val to apply for college and the Air Force Academy.

This prepared him to seek an appointment to the United States Air Force Academy and subsequently his ultimate goal of flight. He competed for and won the nomination of U.S. Representative Edward P. Boland of Springfield, Mass. for the Class of 1959 scheduled to enter in July 1955.

Determined to be the first cadet to enter the new Air Force Academy, Val arrived outside the Lowry Air Force Base gate at approximately 4:30 am on 11 July, 1955. He was greeted by M/Sgt Earl Lynes, administrative noncommissioned officer-in-charge for the Commandant of Cadets. It had occurred to Lynes that someone might get the idea to appear well before the 6:00 am appointed time. After preliminary in-processing checks, Val took the oath of office at 6:10 am and was subsequently joined by the 305 other young men of the 6,300 applicants to inaugurate the Air Force Academy cadet wing.

The rigors and regimentation of academy life were a challenge for Val who readily accepted them and still found time to participate on the intercollegiate baseball and soccer teams. Academic troubles prevented him from graduating with the academy's first class in 1959, but he did persevere to graduate as a regular commissioned officer and rated navigator with 226 other members of the Class of 1960 on 8 June, 1960. Reflecting on his childhood, his first purchase upon graduation was the series "Great Books of the Western World".

Val went on to pilot training at Graham Air Base, Florida and Webb Air Force Base, Texas where he earned his pilot's wings on 16 September, 1961. His first tour of duty was with the 11th Aeromedical Transport Squadron at McGuire Air Force Base, New Jersey. In late 1963, Val received orders to report to C-123B training at Pope Air Force Base, North Carolina with follow-on assignment to the 309th Troop Carrier Squadron, Tan Son Nhut Air Base, Saigon, Viet Nam. Val Bourque's skill as a pilot was recognized early as he was the first lieutenant to be upgraded by the unit to aircraft commander.

Using his skills with the French language, he devised an effective method of communing with the Vietnamese forces – whose second language was French.

Just prior to the end of his tour in October, 1964, Val was on temporary duty from the 309th in support of Special Forces Headquarters. Val's crew was operating from Nha Trang Air Base on a 2-3 week rotation basis, usually air dropping concertina wire, treated sandbags, ammunitions, weapons and miscellaneous gear to outlying outposts long the Cambodian border. The missions usually involved one C-123B aircraft, but were often flown in formations when more than one aircraft was scheduled into the same location. Typically. The airdrops were executed at 300-700 feet altitude above the ground as accuracy was extremely important. A 50-foot miss could mean placing the cargo in a minefield or outside the secure perimeter. The C-123B, being a relatively large aircraft, flying at such low altitudes and airspeed of 115 knots, presented a large vulnerable target for ground weapons.

On Saturday, 24 October, 1964, on his last combat support mission, Val was leading a 3-ship air drop re-supply mission to a special forces camp at the Bu Prang drop zone in a mountainous area of Viet Nam very near the Cambodian border (coordinates 12.17 N, 107.18 E). Since the straight-line course from Nha Trang Air Base to the target drop zone would take the flight over a portion of Cambodian airspace, he planned the flight to a point south of the drop zone, then to proceed north, identify the drop zone visually, then make a dry pass to check wind speed and direction before completing the air drop. Weather factors dictated that success could best be achieved by flying below the cloud bases, using visual cues and pilotage to positively identify and align for the drop. Val and his crew, as well as the crew of the second aircraft, misidentified Camp LeRolland (an old French field in Cambodia at coordinates 12.21 N, 107.22 E) as the Bu Prang drop zone. At the time Camp LeRolland was held by a strong Viet Cong guerrilla force. Upon approach to the field Val's aircraft took extremely heavy and well concentrated small arms and 50 caliber ground fire which disabled both engines of the aircraft. According to eye witnesses in the two accompanying aircraft, Val managed to circle the aircraft and attempt to land in the only available clearing - a tiny patch of treeless ground in the center of very dense jungle just 300 yards inside the Viet Nam border. The aircraft slid through the clearing and entered the trees at the far end of the clearing causing the aircraft to come apart and burn. The resultant fire ignited the explosive cargo. Eye witness reports from aircrew members in the trailing aircraft indicated that Lieutenant Bourque did everything humanly possible to land the aircraft safely and attempted to save those on board.

Within 24 hours, after fighting a night long battle, ground forces made their way to the crash site and recovered the remains of the 6 Air Force crewmen, 2 Army soldiers, and 2 Vietnamese personnel. There were no survivors. Tragically, Val Bourque, the first cadet to enter the Air Force Academy, thus became the first Air Force Academy graduate to die in combat.

Awarded his Captaincy posthumously, Val Bourque at age 28 was also a recipient of 6 Air Medals, the Purple Heart, and several Vietnamese awards. Other honors consist of a youth football league in his hometown which bears his name and, the award given each year to the outstanding baseball player at the Academy each year.

Valmore W. Bourque epitomizes all that is good about the men and women who attend the United States Air Force Academy. His strong desire to attend, complete, and graduate from the Academy and to lead in both peace and war stand as an inspiring example to the young people who do chose this path. His readiness to serve and ultimately to lay down his life for his country and its beliefs deserves to be memorialized in the most fitting manner possible for a heroic aviator of his stature. Naming the Academy airfield the "Valmore W. Bourque" is a fitting and appropriate action to honor this dedicated and courageous officer.