

## MR. JOHN MACGREGOR FOX | CLASS OF 1963



Nearly 60 years ago, the allure of the Colorado mountains was the deciding factor in John Fox's decision to attend the United States Air Force Academy instead of the Naval Academy.

For Fox '63, it was a choice that paid huge dividends for a young man who grew up in the small town of Richland, Washington.

The son of an engineer who worked on the Hanford Project (one of the nation's early nuclear production complexes), Fox calls himself a "curious kid" who enjoyed math and science.

"I liked to take things apart," he laughs. "And sometimes I could put them back together again."

By the time he reached high school, Fox set a personal goal of attending the Naval Academy. His college entrance exam, however, uncovered a deficiency in English skills.

"So the Naval Academy did not choose me that year," he recalls. "I went off to the University of Washington for a year to improve my English skills."

It was a one-year detour that opened up a new opportunity for Fox.

"The next year I heard about this new school called the Air Force Academy," he remembers. "I thought, 'maybe I ought to apply there too.' Lo and behold, I was selected for both the Naval Academy and the Air Force Academy. That created a decision point for me."

An avid skier who enjoyed regular trips to the slopes of Oregon's mountains with his buddies, Fox didn't think there would be many opportunities to enjoy the winter sport in Annapolis.

"But I realized that Colorado probably had some pretty good mountains," he smiles. "I chose the Air Force Academy, and I'm very glad I did. For me, it's made all the difference."



### Doolie Year

Fox headed off to Colorado Springs, not knowing what to expect when he arrived.

"My family was not a military family, so it was sort of out of their wheelhouse," Fox recalls. "But I think they were really proud of me."

It didn't take long for Fox to develop the fortitude necessary to persevere through the daily challenges he faced during his fourth-class year.

His roommate wasn't so fortunate, as that young man suffered a nervous breakdown during Basic Cadet Training and had to leave the Academy. Fox's flight commander that summer — then Cadet Ron Yates (and now retired Gen. Ron Yates) — informed the Doolie that there wouldn't be a replacement roommate.

"This was about a third of the way through basic cadet summer," Fox recalls. "He asked if I was going to be OK alone? I said, 'Well, sir, I think I am.'"

That vote of confidence from an upper-classman was enough to vault Fox forward academically, physically and militarily.

"I thought, if he has confidence in me, then I should have confidence that I can get through this," he notes. "At that point, I felt like it was going to go fine."

### The Cadet Years

While a cadet at the Academy, Fox would lay the groundwork for a life of nonprofit involvement. He helped organize an

Easter celebration for underprivileged kids from Colorado Springs, among other volunteer efforts.

He also enjoyed experiences "that a young boy from southeast Washington probably would have never encountered" without the good fortune of attending USAFA. He traveled to Europe during his third-class summer and joined the ski team, competing at meets across the country.

"I had many wonderful experiences with my classmates," he reports. "My classmates were great. I love my classmates and they are an important part of my life to this day."

Perhaps the biggest takeaways from his time at USAFA were the life lessons that would carry him to numerous career opportunities later in life.

"To me, the Air Force Academy is a leadership laboratory," he says. "You get all kinds of experiences in not only being part of a team but being the leader of a team. It's a wonderful way to experience what it means to lead a group of people, and what it means to do it with integrity."

Another valuable lesson, Fox interjects, is the importance of developing a strong work ethic.

"We always had to achieve at the Academy," he explains. "You couldn't slack off and not get the job done. I think that served me well through the rest of my career in the Air Force and my business career."

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*John Fox poses outside the Denver office building where the Fox Family Foundation conducts its nonprofit efforts. (Photo by Ryan Hall)*

### ABOVE LEFT

*USAFA cadet John Fox (left) and a fellow cadet pause for a photo during their time at the Zoo.*

### ABOVE RIGHT

*Cadet John Fox, Class of 1963.*

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### The Real Air Force

By the time he graduated from USAFA, Fox had enjoyed a number of flights in the skies above Colorado Springs. That helped him set his sights on a pilot training slot.

After two months traveling in Europe, Fox returned to the U.S. to begin pilot training at Williams Air Force Base in Arizona.

"That, too, was a growth experience for me," he recalls. "We had some wonderful instructors there. Just trying to get through the mental part of flying ... was a formative experience for me." ►

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**— John Fox**



Once training was over, Fox became a T-38 instructor pilot at Laughlin Air Force Base in Texas. He would eventually be called upon to design an effective "applied aerodynamics" course for student pilots.

"It was helpful to our student pilots to learn about how an airplane flies," Fox explains, "and to talk about some of the problems they may encounter while in flight. That was a great period of my life."

### **Transition Time**

After six years of service in the Air Force, Fox left military life to pursue other interests.

"I think I realized that my skills were probably better suited to the business world," he says.

He moved to Denver and enrolled in the master's in business administration program at Denver University. A few months later, Fox's sister introduced him to two Shell Oil Company engineers who were starting their own business.

Fox, who was an engineering major at the Academy, talked at length with the entrepreneurs and his own interest kicked in.

"They said they needed an expert finance person," he smiles. "Of course, I raised my hand and said, 'I'm that person.' At that point I was still going through the MBA program. I thought I'd better learn this stuff quickly."

The trio kicked off the company — Western Gas Processors — with no capital and few connections.

"As we started our company and it started to grow, I really was amazed at how comfortable I felt," Fox reports. "I had done all this before when I was an element leader or as a flight leader."

Fox served as the company's executive vice president and chief operating officer until 1988.

"Over those 10 to 15 years, we built the company," Fox reports. "We had \$50 million in sales by the end of that period."

### **A New Challenge**

"At that point, I wanted to do my own thing," Fox says. "But I liked the business I was in. So I left our company and I

started my own company — Markwest Energy Partners."

Fox and his team would run the oil and gas processing company for the next 20 years.

"It was mainly involved, initially, in the Eastern part of the United States," Fox says of Markwest. "We did gas processing and gas fractionation."

As Fox tells it, his company would serve the oil and gas industry by conditioning and compressing the raw oil and gas products that come out of wells.

Under Fox's leadership, Markwest grew and eventually went public.

"I finally retired as chairman of the company in 2010," he notes. "We eventually reached a market value on the New York Stock Exchange of around \$10 billion. I was very gratified that we had that success."

While working with Markwest, Fox also began a new family business drilling for oil and gas.

"We had some success there, too," he says.

Throughout his business career, Fox explains that he often called upon the lessons he learned at the Academy to carry him to greater heights.

"All of those lessons — how to build a team, leadership, how to get people motivated to do something, how to achieve a mission — were extraordinarily helpful to me," he says.

During his oil and gas industry career, Fox says he felt good about providing an essential service to customers and the country.

"I did get a lot of satisfaction out of seeing us produce a useable product that people could use to heat their homes in the winter and cool them in the summer," he says. "It was a fun experience."

### **Giving Back**

Not one to remain idle, Fox established the Fox Family Foundation with proceeds from the sale of founder's stock in Markwest Energy Partners.

"I think one thing you get out of the Academy — and you learn it pretty quickly — is there's a responsibility to give

back,” Fox says. “That’s our legacy. What do we leave behind? That’s been quite important for me.”

The Denver-based nonprofit helps fund about 25 organizations each year.

“The organizations have two themes,” Fox explains. “One is empowerment of women — and these are perhaps low-income women who are trying to get ahead. We support education programs and workshops for them.

“And then there’s underprivileged kids who need a good education. We fund various schools, and we work with entities that serve underprivileged kids and get them on the path to success.”

The list of Fox’s other nonprofit efforts is quite extensive. He supports the Denver Inner City Parish, the Alliance for Choice in Education and Colorado Uplift — which all support educational opportunities for low-income kids.

In addition, he has helped fund research for the Nurse-Family Partnership that promotes early intervention for children born into low-income families.

“If you could provide a nurse-mentor for the first 18 months of a kid’s life, it is shown that you can get great long-term benefit from that,” he explains.

Fox also supports his alma mater in a number of ways, volunteering his time and resources to expand the educational opportunities for current cadets at USAFA.

“For years, I would go to reunions and it became evident that the Academy — as opposed to what a lot of people think — doesn’t have all the funds it needs to support cadet excellence,” he says. “I didn’t realize how big a gap that was until my friend and classmate, Bill Wecker, started the USAFA Endowment. It was his vision that this would be something that could contribute meaningfully to the Academy program to promote cadet excellence.”

For the past 10 years, Fox has been an integral part of the Endowment’s ongoing fundraising efforts. Among the projects he personally supported are the Holaday Athletic Center and Polaris Hall (the new home of the Center for Character and Leadership Development).

“These are all things that the Air Force itself can’t fund completely,” he says. “I think we provide a very valuable service to the Academy and to the Air Force by being willing to step up and provide funding and moral support for all these great programs that are able to happen as a result of philanthropy.”

### Coffee Time

For the past 30 years, Hawaii has been a favorite destination for the Fox family. So it wasn’t a surprise when Fox began looking for a home to buy in the tropical paradise.

“We had a real estate salesman and he was showing us all the various possibilities,” Fox says. “He told us he was also in the coffee business. Long story short, he was a great salesman. So he sold me both a place to stay in my retirement and he sold me a coffee farm, which he said was going to be a very easy thing to deal with and we would make lots of money.”

It didn’t quite work out that way. The farm suffered 10 straight years of losses, until Fox decided he needed to find a local partner to run the operation. Now, the Kona Mountain Coffee firm is starting to turn a small profit.

“The coffee business in Hawaii is a lot of fun,” he reports. “We have a wonderful group of Hawaiians who run our company.”

Fox also continues to keep his fingers in the oil and gas business today. His family business continues to drill in Wyoming, and it’s pursuing a possible additional venture in Pennsylvania.

“I think it shows some promise,” he says. “So I spend some time on that as well.”

### Distinguished Graduate

Fox says he was “stunned” when alerted that he was one of three nominees selected to receive this year’s Distinguished Graduate Award.

“For one thing — when I saw the other two nominees for this year — I thought, ‘I hope I can come up to just a part of their stature,’” he says. “I’m just glad to be part of this group. It’s a great honor. I’m very



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*John Fox and his wife, Sandy, visit their coffee farm in Hawaii as often as possible. The red berries hold the seed, which is the coffee bean before it's roasted. (Submitted photos)*

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*John Fox during his early years as an Air Force pilot and instructor.*

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grateful to the Academy and to the selection committee.”

He thanks his wife, Sandy, his three children and six grandchildren for their support during his life and career.

“Being a grandfather is one of the best experiences I’ve ever had,” he admits. “I love my grandchildren. I’ve skied with them. I watch them play basketball, I watch them cheerlead. Sometimes they have some ups and downs, and sometimes I can help them with that. And then they come over to the house and they help me out. It’s been great. It’s a real treasure to have neat grandchildren.”

Fox adds he appreciates the many opportunities he’s had to succeed in life in general and in business specifically. 