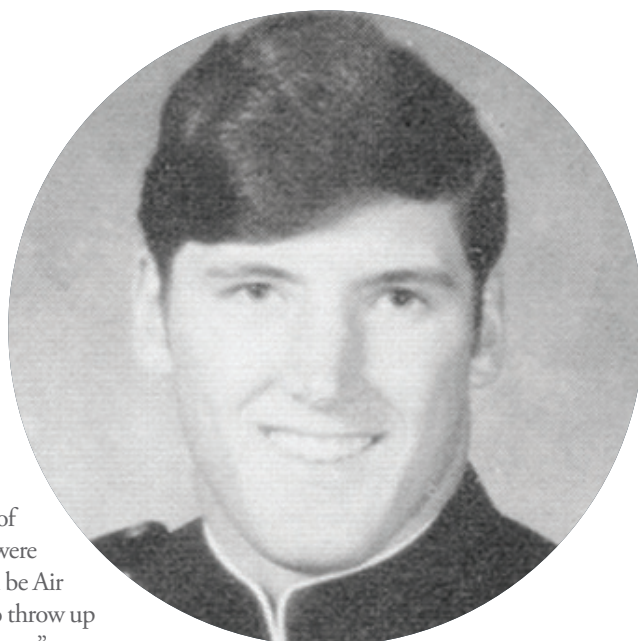




JOHN "JACK" KUCERA

1978



On track to attend pilot training after graduation from USAFA, John "Jack" Kucera '78 was living the dream.

But in his final Falcon football game against Army, the defensive leader took on an opposing player with the same gusto that he'd attempted every tackle during his record-breaking college career. This time, however, he was knocked out from the blow.

"They used smelling salts those days and they got me up," he recalls. A few plays later, he was back on the field, convinced he could help lead his team to victory. He lasted just one more play — something was terribly wrong.

His future wife, Vianne, took him to the Academy Hospital after the game for X-rays. The doctor indicated there was a problem but sent him back to his dorm for the rest of the weekend.

Kucera returned on Monday, submitting to a series of X-rays to get a full diagnosis.

"I went to practice that night, and my linebacker coach — John Lorber — told me the results," Kucera remembers. "All three of my vertebrae were compressed 30 percent or more. At that point, I knew I was done with football."

What he didn't realize, however, was that the serious injury would cost him a pilot slot after graduation. And eventually, just two

weeks before his graduation ceremony, Kucera was told he would not be commissioned as a second lieutenant in the Air Force.

"I had 900-some classmates who were celebrating," he says of the devastating news. "They were going to throw up their hats and be Air Force officers, and I was going to throw up my hat and that was the end for me."

Thanks to the valuable lesson of perseverance that he learned from his father and from his cadet experience, Kucera didn't spend much time wallowing in self-pity.

He quickly found a new career path and went on to make a huge difference in the business world and, somewhat remarkably, for his alma mater.

"Life does that to us," he reflects. "In a flash of an eye, everything changes for you. Whatever path we thought we'd mapped for ourselves is going to be different now — but it doesn't have to be a bad different, it can be a good different."

As he looks back over his life, Kucera believes the path he settled on was the perfect match for him.

"I feel today like I've made more of a contribution to the Air Force Academy having gone down this path than the impact I would have had had I gone on to become an

Air Force officer," he says. "Making lemonade from lemons ... it is that to a certain extent."

Small Town Start

Born and raised in the Black Hills of South Dakota, Kucera enjoyed a relatively care-free childhood that included playing in the woods, fishing and sports.

The community was dominated by one local business — the Homestake Mining Company. "Everybody worked for the mine," he says, including his father, who was an electrician. It was never out of the question that Kucera might work for the mine someday.

A product of Catholic grade school, Kucera developed a competitive streak that would serve him well in life.

"I had a paper route all the way through high school, and I would literally time myself every day," he laughs. "My parents would see

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me running down the hill and think somebody was chasing me, but I was just trying to see how fast I could get done. I enjoyed competition ... even if it was just against myself.”

His family occasionally took trips to visit his uncle in Boulder, Colorado. One summer, the family took a side trip to Colorado Springs and stopped by the new United States Air Force Academy. Kucera was impressed, but never thought much about going to school there.

A high school teacher, who was a big supporter of the service academies, later encouraged Kucera to apply. West Point was the only academy to recruit him for football, so Kucera took a recruiting trip out east. He decided it was too far from home.

He switched his focus to USAFA instead, a choice that was buoyed by a previous encounter he had with a cadet.

“I was 14 years old, working at the A&W Root Beer stand, and I remember Rick Williams [’72] coming in with his blue Corvette,” he smiles. “I thought, ‘I want to go to the Air Force Academy. They must issue Corvettes there.’”

Cadet Moments

Kucera admits he had no idea what awaited him as a USAFA cadet.

“I wasn’t very prepared for the first moments, or even the first days for that matter.” He laughs. “It wasn’t like we could YouTube things in those days and see what basic training was like.”

Despite the challenging days, Kucera never considered quitting and heading home.

“I don’t think I’d ever quit anything in my life, and I didn’t have any intention of quitting then,” he says.

He would go on to do well in school and with the physical challenges, and he ultimately enjoyed leadership experiences, including serving as deputy wing commander.

Falcon Fever

Early in his cadet career, Kucera tried out for the Falcon football team as a walk-on. He immediately impressed the coaching staff and was added to the freshman team.

“Football was really a salvation,” he says. “It was time away from the rigors of cadet life.”

During his four years on the team, he would break Academy records for most tackles in a game, season and career. In addition, he served as team captain during his senior season.

After his injury, Kucera was still hopeful that things would work out. He was to re-

main at USAFA after graduation to serve as the linebacker coach for the freshman squad. He also was slated to go to Williams Air Force Base for pilot training a year later. Both opportunities never materialized.

“I was told I was too great a liability,” he recalls. “I was kind of caught in kind of a Twilight Zone. I didn’t know what I was going to do.”

Kucera was summoned before a medical board to discuss his future. After the five-minute gathering, Kucera was informed that he wouldn’t be commissioned.

“Of course, that’s a very defining moment,” he says. “It was a difficult thing.”

A Quick Detour

Kucera had no idea where to turn. He stopped by the cadet career counseling office to see if they could help, but they had little to offer.

“I was a civil engineer with a really sore back,” he recalls. “Computers haven’t been invented yet, so engineers aren’t doing their work on a computer, they’re doing their work on drafting boards. I couldn’t picture myself leaning over a drafting board all day ... that was going to be miserable.”

Fortunately, Kucera traveled to a job fair in Dallas for military members who were leaving the service.

After interviewing with eight companies, Kucera settled on an opportunity with York Air Conditioning in Denver, Colorado. It’s an industry he’s remained a part of ever since.

“Obviously I didn’t have any grand plan,” he says. “I needed a job, because I was going to have a car payment and I needed a place to live. It is somewhat remarkable that I stayed in it.”

After two years, Kucera transferred to York’s Phoenix office. Then, while he completed his master’s of business administration at Arizona State University, Kucera received a call from the founder of a competitor — Climatec — asking if he’d be interested in buying the company.

He said no, but later became intrigued by the thought of owning his own business. In 1984, he went to work at Climatec, then in 1987 he purchased the company. Under his leadership, the company grew from 12 to 850 employees with offices in Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California.

In 1993, he co-founded Huntair, providing HVAC solutions to the semiconductor,



biotech, health care and pharmaceutical industries. From Huntair, an Isolation Technology division was born that transformed the semiconductor process tool industry.

The Huntair experience was a difficult one, Kucera admits, because the business contracted in the years following 9/11. The company went from 800 employees to 140 and struggled to survive. But the leadership lessons he learned as a cadet helped him stay the course and diversify the company. He and his partner eventually sold the now-successful company.

"We made the business survive and thrive again," he reports. "We had a happy ending, where it could have had a tragic ending."

After Huntair, Kucera co-founded BasX Solutions, leaders in the data center, clean room and modular central plant businesses.

Market Shifts

Kucera has been able to ride the wave of massive change in the heating and air conditioning business through the years.

"It was a relatively unchanged industry for many, many years," he notes. "All of a sudden it became the direct digital control world, where everything was computer based and these traditional ways went out the window."

Those changes created new opportunities for Kucera. His customers today include universities, hospitals, school districts, semiconductor companies and pharmaceutical companies.

"I feel what we do is very impactful," he says. "Today's building is a lot more friendly to the environment and to people, than buildings of the past were. Growing up in a

mining town and thinking I'm going to go to mining school, and maybe come back to the mine and be a mining engineer, I never would have imagined that I would have the career that I've had."

Giving Back

Kucera says he and his wife, Vianne, have taken this journey together. They have contributed their time and resources for numerous efforts.

Kucera has served on the Association of Graduates Board and is a trustee of the Falcon Foundation. He became a founding director and served as the chairman of the Air Force Academy Foundation from 2017 to 2020.

The Kuceras have contributed leadership gifts to numerous Academy projects, including the Holaday Athletic Center and Falcon Stadium renovation.

"Today, sports venues at college campuses are part of what makes kids choose to go there," he says. "I just think we can do a lot to improve ours. In many ways, ours is as outdated as it gets."

The Kuceras plan to be involved in the AFA Foundation comprehensive campaign, raising funding for key projects at the institution.

The couple was recently awarded the Lee Hanley Community Leadership award by the Arizona Diamondbacks for their support of numerous Phoenix charities.

Up and Away

In the summer of 1977, Kucera went through the T-41 program at the Academy. The experience made him excited about becoming a pilot.

His injury, however, waylaid his plans for 30 years. In 2007, he purchased a Pilatus PC-12 aircraft and pursued his private pilot's license. With offices in several states, Kucera felt it would be helpful if he could fly himself to destinations.

Since getting his license, Kucera also has used his airplane to assist nonprofits and to help the Falcon football team. He and fellow USAFA graduate Tim Fyda '79, transport the coaching staff on recruiting trips throughout the nation.

"Part of the reason Tim and I volunteer to do it is because USAFA doesn't have a budget to support it, but our sister service academies do," he says. "If we're going to stay in the game and be competitive, it's something we


need to do."

For a USAFA graduate who was not commissioned, Kucera says it's a privilege to do all he can to support his alma mater.

"I think the fact that I wasn't commissioned probably makes me feel that I have an even greater debt of gratitude to pay to the Air Force Academy," he says. "I look at what I got at the Academy, and frankly I'd feel pretty guilty if I weren't giving back in as meaningful a way as I can. I don't think there's a more impactful way to impact America's future than investing in kids at the Air Force Academy."

DG Honor

When he received word that he'd been named a 2019 Distinguished Graduate of USAFA, Kucera was on his way to visit his father in a hospice facility. He holds back the tears as he recalls the emotions of the moment.

"I couldn't talk. It was very emotional," he admits. "I'm fortunate to know many of the Distinguished Graduates, and to be included in that group was a very humbling moment." 

LEFT: Jack Kucera was captain of the Falcons football team during his first year.

ABOVE: These days, Jack Kucera supports the USAFA football team by flying coaches on recruiting trips.

BOTTOM: Jack and Vianne Kucera, along with their son, Neil.

