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

“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 remain 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,
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says. “Today’s building is a lot more friendly 
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universities, hospitals, school districts, 
for Kucera. His customers today include 
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den it became the direct digital control world, 
many, many years,” he notes. “All of a sud-
ing business through the years.

Market Shifts
Kucera has been able to ride the wave of mas-
sive change in the heating and air condition-
ing business through the years.

“It was a relatively unchanged industry for 
many, many years,” he notes. “All of a sud-
den 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 pharmaceu-
tical 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
ne to do.”

For a USAFA graduate who was not com-
missioned, Kucera says it’s a privilege to do all 
he can to support his alma mater.

“I think the fact that I wasn’t commis-
ioned probably makes me feel that I have an 
even greater debt of gratitude to pay to the 
got at the Academy, and frankly I’d feel pretty 
guilty if I weren’t giving back in as meaningful 
way as I can. I don’t think there’s a more im-
 pactful 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 firstie 
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.