Breaking Down the "Berlin Wall": A VMI Cadet in the W&L World

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The Virginia Military Institute and Washington and Lee University are geographically very close; in fact, they are the only two universities in the United States that share a border. An outsider to either one of these cultures may assume that the students share relationships as close as their location, but that is not necessarily the case. Although VMI and Washington & Lee share a common history, the students know little about the culture of the respected "other" school. As a VMI cadet, I conducted an ethnographic study to better understand the Washington & Lee culture as well as the general view of VMI from the "other side" of the border. Borrowed from a field of anthropology, ethnographies reveal the activities and interpersonal relationships of a specific group of people. Using historical research, observational field notes, interviews, and personal narrative, this qualitative research paper tells an interesting story of perspectives from either side of the border. From my field research, I came to the conclusion that Washington & Lee students are for the most part unknowledgeable about the life of VMI cadets, and despite a few bad encounters, they are interested in and respectful of VMI.

History

To the average tourist in the historic town of Lexington, the Virginia Military Institute and Washington and Lee University appear to have nothing in common aside from the border they share. However, a closer look reveals a much more interesting relationship. When VMI was established in 1839 an arrangement with what was then Washington College allowed for an exchange of professors from both schools. The arrangement provided for students at Washington College to receive military training from VMI professors and to drill with the cadets. Meanwhile, VMI cadets

pursued courses at the college which weren't offered at the Institute, such as chemistry.[1]

A unique lexis developed among the schools as a result of the relationship. For example, the tradition of calling incoming VMI cadets, "rats," started during the joint drills with students from Washington College who looked down on the cadets. VMI cadets retaliated by calling their neighbors "minks" because they were mean and sly.[2] However, VMI soon found the arrangement to be problematic. The 1839 arrangement called for the students at Washington College, who drilled with cadets, to adorn the same uniforms as their VMI counterparts. As a result, VMI received criticism from the public who mistook the hooliganism of Washington College students for VMI cadets.[3] In 1870, Washington College was renamed Washington and Lee after its most famous president, Robert E. Lee.[4]

On more than one occasion in the 1940s VMI cadets also became victims of vicious snow ball and beer can bombardments from W&L students. In response to the surprise attacks, VMI cadets have been known to paint W&L buildings red, white, and yellow, which are VMI's school colors.[5] Upon my arrival at VMI I found that the perception of many cadets was that VMI and W&L's historically tumultuous relationship is still intact.

Introduction

When you think of the proverbial "college experience" the very last college that comes to mind is the Virginia Military Institute. At VMI there are no sorority-fraternity mixers, no keg parties, no co-ed volleyball games in the quad, and certainly no sun dresses. There is only the yellowish-grayish colored Barracks, the endless parade field, and roughly 1,500 cadets. However, the lure of Washington and Lee, especially on weekends, provides a refreshing yet surreal escape from life at VMI. Even if the border is crossed into W&L, a fun night is still not guaranteed due to the assumed confrontational relationship between VMI cadets and W&L students. I had always heard stories of VMI cadets getting jumped by W&L guys, so I just went along with the belief that a peaceful and mutually beneficial relationship was impossible. Still the possibility of a fun night has lingered in my mind, and I have escaped many W&L parties with no fights. Nevertheless, the party scene is not the appropriate discourse community to document the feeling of a VMI cadet in the W&L world. Instead, I placed myself on the W&L campus and in the company of W&L students to reveal their true attitudes towards VMI. Prior to my research I assumed that the traditional paradigm would remain true, but I quickly learned that there was little to no animosity towards VMI, and that many W&L students wanted to break down the invisible barrier between the two schools.

Day 1: RUF

It was a Tuesday night when I made my first visit over to the W&L campus. I had seen W&L's campus before, but never this up-close and personal. It was that time of the evening where it is getting darker, but it is still light enough to see everything. W&L's campus is gorgeous. The historic buildings and old brick walkways act like a time machine, catapulting you back to the 1900s where

such infrastructure was commonplace. I was about 300 yards onto the W&L campus and sporting my all-white and very noticeable VMI uniform when I passed my first "mink." Contrary to the opinion of my VMI ancestors, this "mink" was polite and sociable. I didn't catch his name but he walked past in a W&L t-shirt and blue jeans, smiled, and said, "Hey, how's it going?" I gave a quick reply as we walked past each other and made my way closer to my destination. This brief encounter got me ready to do more extensive research, because it showed the capacity of W&L students to be friendly towards VMI cadets. It was a very quiet evening as I made my way down the steps of the outdoor amphitheatre and into the bottom of D-Hall where the Reformed University Fellowship (RUF) group holds their weekly meetings.

Reformed University Fellowship acts as a ministry of the Presbyterian Church in America. It was formed in the late 1970s by a group of young southeastern Presbyterian ministers who wanted to create a campus ministry that could be "both theologically honest and winsomely welcoming." Since its inception, RUF has expanded to over 100 campuses nationwide and has a full time staff of more than 200 (RUF).

I took a deep breath before I opened the doors to D-Hall and walked in timidly. My hesitation surprised me because I'm never uncomfortable being around unfamiliar people. I suppose I was nervous because I was unsure of how the group members would react to me being there to document their actions, not to learn from the Bible study. I walked in anyway. My ears were immediately met by the sound of a familiar song, "Amazing Love." I had heard the song during church services at my local church, but I had never heard it sung so beautifully than that night at RUF. The bearers of this impressive performance were a quartet consisting of three girls and one guy who stood in a horizontal line facing the middle of the room. I must have arrived at the end of the song, because they stopped singing

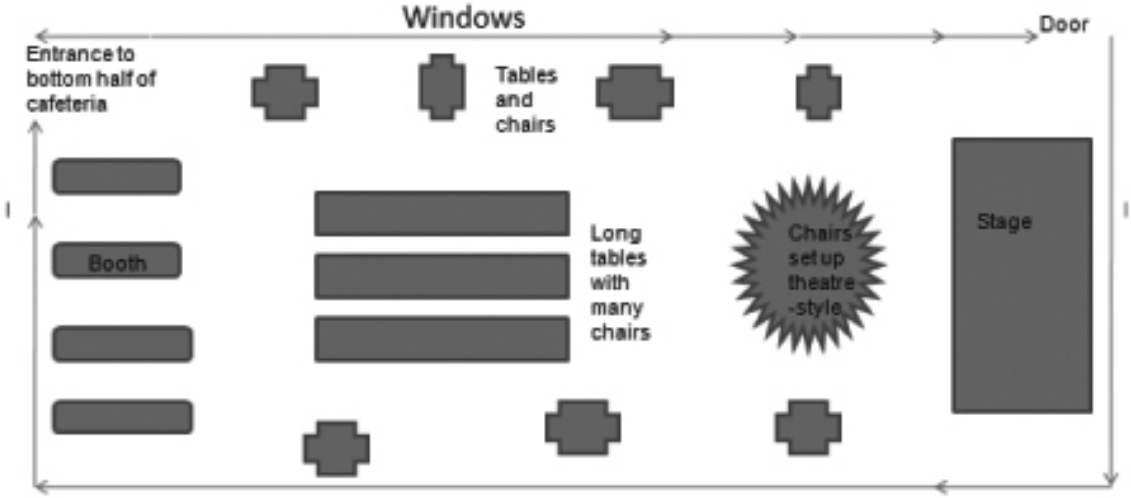

Figure 1: The room at the bottom of D-Hall where the weekly RUF meetings are held.

shortly after I walked in. Their warm smiles and friendly "hellos" made me feel very at home, which was a relief. I proceeded to the back of the room and sat down in one of the booths to trace a diagram of the room. The layout of the room is important because it contains plenty of tables, chairs, and booths that allow for members of the group, or W&L students in general, to sit down and relax (See Figure 1).

Nearly five minutes after I sat down a girl named Caitlyn approached me. Caitlyn was dressed comfortably, which seemed to be everybody's choice of dress that night. She wore black pants and a black velvet jacket with an orange t-shirt. She came right up to the booth where I was sitting and smiled, then offered me her hand for a handshake. Caitlyn was originally from South Africa, but she came to W&L from Wisconsin. I noticed right away that Caitlyn was one of the girls in the singing group, because she had such a distinct voice and big smile. Caitlyn said she was glad that I decided to come to RUF, even though it was for research, then we exchanged "see you laters" and she walked away. Our conversation was very short, but I was delighted with her kindness and I began to second-guess the paradigm I was there to investigate. Up to this point the only dialogue I ever had with a W&L student had been at parties, but even then I had not been a part of or witnessed any of the horror stories.

No sooner had Caitlyn left when familiar looking face approached me. Daniel Welsh was a law student at W&L and had graduated from VMI the previous year. I remembered Daniel because I had seen him at chapel at VMI a few Sundays during my rat year. Daniel played soccer at VMI, and he was sporting a soccer t-shirt and shorts when I saw him this particular night at RUF. Daniel's presence at RUF, and the fact that he had made the transition from VMI to W&L, indicated a breakdown in the invisible barrier that divides both schools.

Daniel suggested we move to the front of the room since it was approaching start time, which is usually 8 p.m. Daniel and I walked right to the front of the stage where chairs had been moved from the room's periphery and set up in a movie-theatre-type arrangement. The stage was the focal point of the room, the place where everybody was beginning to congregate. I sat down in a chair next the isle where I could see the stage and most of the members of the group.

A girl named Kara sat down close to me and kept looking at me like she was interested in why I was there. She was sitting one row behind me and two chairs to my left, so she had a good vantage point of my notes. Kara kept peering in my direction, so being my usual out going self; I introduced myself and explained my project. She was very familiar with VMI and I quickly learned that her brother, Josh, was in my company. Not only did she mention that she was Josh's sister, but she also looked exactly like Josh. Kara was a graduate student at Liberty University and made the weekly trip to W&L for RUF. Kara was a very soft-spoken girl, but once she started talking she didn't like to stop. Most of the girls in the room were wearing simple dresses or blue-jean pants, but Kara had on a long blue-jean skirt that reminded me of something a Mormon woman would wear. Anyways, I asked Kara why she

made the drive every week from Liberty to W&L, and she simply said, "It's a good group." Kara asked me several questions about my friendship with her brother, my project and VMI in general, but I got so caught up in the conversation that I forgot to record it. Between her and Daniel I didn't feel much like I was at W&L. There appeared to me to be an inescapability of VMI from the campus at W&L. I found this interesting since I have never noticed a reciprocated inescapability, probably because W&L students have no reason to escape their side of the invisible barrier.

By about 8:15 most of the chairs were filled and Jonathan Davis, one of the student leaders, stepped to the front of the stage. Jonathan had curly brown hair and a red shirt that jumped out at me immediately, thus I dubbed him "red shirt guy." The group's area of Bible study over the last few weeks must have been about the Ten Commandments, because red-shirt guy jumped right into a series of hand signals that corresponded to each commandment. Everybody in the group laughed as he went through the signals, and I thought it was interesting that the hand signal to remember to obey your father and mother was a hand salute. After the salute, red-shirt guy suggested that "the VMI guys" could relate to that hand signal, and glanced over at me. Red shirt guy's notion had me wondering whether or not he would've made a VMI reference if I had not been in the room, wearing a VMI uniform. Regardless, the prevalence of VMI in the W&L community had appeared again in a positive context, rather than a negative one. The environment in the room at this point was special. Everybody in the room seemed to know red-shirt guy, and they all laughed as he made his hand signals. I got the impression that everybody knew each other, everybody respected each other, and everybody loved being at RUF together. Their connection to each other reminded me of the strong bonds that are inherently characteristic of VMI cadets.

At VMI, the rat line is one of oldest and most cherished traditions. This age-old tradition aims to break down socio-economic barriers between students, and then raise them from the ashes as a unified class. The process echoes the mythical rebirth of the phoenix, and results in an unbreakable bond amongst those who survive. You would be hard-pressed to find a bond significantly stronger than those shared by alumni from the Virginia Military Institute.

The bonds formed at RUF are much more flexible than rat line bonds. In other words, no outsider could ever consider themselves a part of the VMI alumni, but anybody who comes to RUF just once can consider themselves RUF alumni. For the RUF regulars, I was an outsider, but they didn't treat me like it. By the end of the night I felt like I was a part of RUF and many of the people there urged me to continue coming. One might say then that RUF bonds are much more surface level than rat line bonds, and such an assessment would probably be accurate. Thus, RUF bonds are significantly more unbiased.

Also unlike VMI, RUF is completely absent of hierarchies or power struggles. Even the so-called leader, John, seemed more of a friend to the students than a supervisor. He had a soft-spoken voice and he looked like he should be a young life minister. I say that because

I had a young life leader when I was a sophomore in high school who always wore cargo shorts and a t-shirt, which made him appear to be one of us. In John's case, he wore a red-checkered button-up shirt and khaki pants, which was also very similar to what the other guys at RUF were wearing. Before the lesson, I watched John as he migrated through small clusters of students awaiting the start of the meeting. With each group he engaged in their conversations as if he was a student at W&L. The absence of a hierarchical structure at RUF would be an anomaly at VMI, due to the military setting. The military is wrought with hierarchies, hence the ranking system. John's familiarity with the students resurfaced when he read a passage from Isaiah 43 and noted, "This is Lauren's favorite." I assumed Lauren was one of the group members that I had not met. John's comment indicated that interactions between him and the students aren't confined to Tuesday nights at 8, but they happen all the time. The bonds created at RUF are not forged the same way they are at VMI, but it is interesting to point out strong bonds can be created voluntarily, not just through VMI's rise-from-the-ashes method.

Post-rat line life at VMI is still very strenuous and very time consuming. As a result, I have not been able to attend church as regularly as I would like and I've missed being involved in a Bible study group. Luckily, my research led me to find the best of both worlds at RUF. In a way I felt as though John's lesson was directed towards me that night. The premise of the Bible study was, as humans, our greatest need should be Jesus Christ. John asked questions like "What do we want most in life?" and "What are you going after with all your energy?" I found myself thinking about what my answers to those questions would be, and right away I said law school, success, having fun, and my family. None of my answers dealt with Jesus Christ, but I have always seen Christ as an overarching necessity. My realization was met by another thought that I probably wasn't the only person in the room struggling to balance my needs with the "greatest need." At that time I realized that everybody in that room became closer. There was no VMI and there was no W&L, just college students with the same problems, and the same questions about life.

The gray area that exists between VMI and W&L reappeared after John's lesson as I was approached by a guy named Wynn who was extremely interested and very unknowledgeable of VMI. Wynn is a sophomore from Illinois who is majoring in history and philosophy. He asked question after question about why I went to VMI, the rat line, how I was allowed to leave post and what the relationship is between the upperclassmen and underclassmen. I interrupted Wynn's onslaught of questions to ask what W&L people thought about VMI. Wynn smiled and replied, "People think it's weird." I found it odd that they could jump to such a conclusion about VMI cadets, especially after what I felt that night at RUF. Wynn made it clear that the weirdness stemmed from cadets who venture into W&L parties to "freeload" alcohol, but don't socialize. Wynn couldn't give me a direct example of this weird behavior, but I did learn of such behavior from Luke.

I ran into Luke after my discussion with Wynn as I returned to my booth at the back of the room. Luke plays football and lacrosse for W&L and he told me a story about how some cadets were behaving awkwardly one night at a party, which explained the weirdness that Wynn had mentioned before. The cadets Luke was talking about had evidently stayed in a corner of a party all night, by themselves, and marveled at a table that was decorated with the W&L logo. I didn't understand why the cadets were so enthralled by the logo, but I had to agree, their actions were definitely weird. One of the girls sitting with Luke chimed in after the story and said "a few [cadets] can cause a stereotype." Her name was Audrey.

I had noticed Audrey earlier because she sat right in front me during John's lesson. I had been hoping I get a chance to meet her seeing as she was a very cute girl. Audrey was dressed in what looked like silky workout pants, but I assumed she worn them for leisure, and a matching jacket. I expressed concern at Audrey's comment simply because I didn't want to be involved in that stereotype. Audrey suggested that "it's not bad to go to VMI" and that, as cadets, we should break the weird stereotype and understand that the majority of W&L people are willing to do the same. Time had flown by during our refreshingly normal conversation, and I felt like I was doing a fine job of breaking the stereotype. Indeed, Audrey said with a smile, "I know it can be done, look at you, you're completely normal." By about 10 p.m. my new friends made it clear they needed to start studying for their exams. We exchanged "goodbyes" and they left as I finished up my note taking. I walked out of the bottom of D-Hall and back up the stone steps of the outdoor amphitheatre with a feeling of accomplishment. I made my way through the quad, which was now blanketed with the darkness of the night, and past the historic buildings, but with a smile on my face.

A Familiar Walk

It was exactly a week after my first visit to W&L's campus as I made the familiar walk through the quad, along the old brick walkway and past the historic buildings. Unlike my initial visit, I was eager to get to D-Hall and see what was going on, even though I knew RUF club was not meeting due to exams. There was much more hustle and bustle on this particular night. The area directly above my destination was the outdoor eating area of D-Hall. There was a medium-sized patio with about five or six sets of tables and chairs and a group of about fifteen W&L students. They were situated right next to the amphitheatre and as I descended the stone stairs, I got that feeling that they were staring at me. I don't know why I suspected them of staring, but maybe it had something to do with the fact that I was wearing a VMI uniform. Nevertheless, I descended the stone steps and walked anxiously through the doors to the bottom half of D-Hall.

It was about 8 o'clock when I walked in and I made my way back to the same booth I sat in last week. I knew RUF was not meeting tonight, but the room, as I mentioned before, was a great place to relax and study so I decided to give it another shot. The room was completely empty except for a single girl sitting along the wall to my right, so I went

to talk to her. Her name was Christie and she was an international student from Beijing, China. Christie was a nice contrast from RUF club since she was a freshman and W&L, not to mention being from China, so she was largely unbiased to VMI boys. She actually liked them more than W&L boys. Christie said that W&L boys like to dress up a lot and that "some are approachable, some are not." When I asked her about VMI boys, Christie said that she and her suitemate liked VMI boys because "they are very polite and athletic." Christie also liked how VMI boys always say hi to her and they are very approachable.

My interview with Christie represented an outlier of what I perceived to be the normal culture at W&L. The week before at RUF I had also been a part of an abnormal W&L culture, because I assumed that not all W&L students would be as welcoming. Considering RUF is a Bible study and one of their main goals is to attract new people, they are naturally going to be more accepting of visitors. Therefore, in order to do justice to my research I knew I had to seek out a normal W&L setting, where nobody was obligated to approach me. I left the bottom of D-Hall tired and ready to get back to my room, but as I passed the W&L library I decided to stop by and have a look.

The Library

I made my way through the side entrance of the library, which was just off the left side of the old brick walkway. I situated myself in a chair with a good vantage point of the doors I had just walked in, which became my new focal point. W&L's library is definitely more comfortable than VMI's. They had tons of soft couches and chairs, and even free coffee! I saw many people walk into the library but none of them paid any attention to the fact that I was sitting there, in a uniform, sticking out like a sore thumb. Their lack of attention for me may have been because it was still exam week and they had more important things to worry about, but I expected to receive a little more interest nonetheless. Then again, they may have noticed me, but I didn't take it personally that they neglected to approach me.

My friend Luke, who I had met at RUF, walked in with his friend Will. Since I already knew what Luke would say to my questions, I focused my attention on his friend. However, Will seemed very stand-offish to my questions. He didn't make eye contact with me, but rather looked down at his phone. I asked him the same questions that I asked Christie, but his responses weren't nearly as interesting as Christie's. In fact, I didn't even record any of his answers. Will acted anxious to get to his studies so I thanked him for his time and he left.

Throughout my interview with Will, I noticed a number of people walking in and out of the library with cups of coffee. Coffee is an essential part of life at VMI and I learned quickly that it was one at W&L as well. Surely coffee is a precious commodity among college students nationwide, but that's why it's important. Coffee signifies normalcy, and since VMI cadets love it as much as W&L students, I was reassured that we are perfectly capable of being normal.

Cell phones appeared much more prevalent in W&L's library than VMI's. Nearly every person I saw was dressed comfortably in athletic shorts, or

sweat pants, and a t-shirt, and they all had cell phones. I was beginning to wonder when they were going to start studying. At that point I considered the possibility that the physical act of wearing a military uniform might effectively facilitate homework, more so than regular clothes. I know for me at least, wearing a uniform represents discipline and gets me in the mindset to be productive. Not to mention the fact that the disciplined life at VMI restricts us from carrying cell phones around as freely as the students I was witnessing at W&L. That is not to say that cadets don't carry around their cell phones, because they do, but the consequences for getting caught using a cell phone lead cadets to keep them concealed.

In the midst of my cognitive analysis of VMI cell phone usage I was interrupted by the laughter of two girls who were sitting next to the side entrance doors. I went over to investigate. Their names were Emily and Megan, and they were both freshmen. They were laughing because Megan didn't have an exam the next day, so she was distracting Emily with funny online videos. I unfortunately didn't catch what they were watching. Emily said she noticed my uniform when I walked in, but said it wasn't too far out of the ordinary since she sees cadets walking around W&L all the time. Her comment raised my question, "Why don't you spend time at VMI?" Emily's response reminded me of a metaphor I had heard from my classmate, Burton Bachelor. Burton described W&L as West Berlin and VMI as East Berlin, which implied that W&L students are free and we are not. Indeed, the metaphor seemed apparent when Emily said she thought VMI was "gated." Emily's lack of understanding of VMI was permissible due the fact that she was only in her first year, but her response alludes to a more important discovery: that an invisible barrier persists.

Conclusion

Between my two visits to W&L I had spent roughly five hours studying the cultural differences, or lack thereof, with VMI. I was lucky to sit in on the RUF club which gave me a focused look at a small group of people from W&L. Christie gave me a great "outsider" opinion of VMI and W&L, and my research in the library provided an area of which I was the outsider, but I also didn't have any help like I did at RUF. My study of W&L opened my eyes to the possibility of worthwhile relationships with students from W&L. This whole time I've been worried that I was being looked down upon or viewed negatively by W&L students, when in actuality they, for the most part, have only wanted somebody to breakdown the invisible Berlin Wall that has existed for so long.

Endnotes

[1]Wise, Jennings. *The Military History of the Virginia Military Institute from 1839 to 1865*. Lynchburg, VA: J.P. Bell, 1915. 53-54.

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[3]Smith, Francis. *The Virginia Military Institute, Its Building and Rebuilding*. Lynchburg, VA: J.P. Bell, 1915. 69.

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[5]Wise. 156.

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