



The Critical Role of the VMI Rat Line



I knew that VMI would not be an easy place, but that was attractive for me. I liked the idea of going someplace where I would have to work for recognition and acceptance.

Tyler Creammer '20

A cadetship at VMI is a one-of-a-kind challenge for students from all over the world. Members of the Corps will be tested to their limits, and they will emerge uniquely qualified to succeed in the world and serve their community. Upon completion of their cadetship, graduates join a lifelong community of others who have faced the same challenge. VMI alumni are forever devoted to service in all of its forms, conducting themselves with honor and living with a special confidence forged by the challenge of their time on post. Every aspect of the VMI experience drives cadets to achieve more than they thought possible, and in the process creates a notion of a shared vision for pursuit of excellence in all things. Instilling these values begins on day one — in the Rat Line.

The VMI Rat Line

The Rat Line is an integral part of a matriculant's transformation into a VMI cadet. For over a century the Rat Line has brought together groups of individuals and turned them into a VMI "class." All matriculants, known as "rats," start on equal footing—the same uniform, same rules, same obligations, and same expectations for excellence. Through significant adversity, they dig deep to harness their skills and determination. They also find that success is only possible working together as a team. As a result, a unified class emerges from the Rat Line. Within that class, each cadet has begun the transformation into a unique servant leader, imbued with an understanding of the importance of Honor, and the confidence to face any future challenge with poise and focus. Without this adversity, a VMI cadet would be no different than any other college graduate. The last day of the Rat Line consists entirely of team-based physical training, both physically and mentally challenging. When the Rat Line is complete, and the final challenge has been conquered, the rats "break out" and they join the VMI community as a class, not as individuals. The cadre, upper-class mentors, and the VMI administration will not approve a breakout until the group has demonstrated they have come together as a unified class.



The Rat Line and Leadership Transformations with 2nd Lts. Townsend & Forehand '19

*[Episode 3](#) of the *VMI Leader Journey Podcast**

FORGING THE “CLASS”

There is no greater status amongst VMI cadets and alumni than that of class year. A VMI cadet is part of his or her class for a lifetime. VMI alumni proudly broadcast their VMI class year on e-mail signatures, correspondence, and in conversations with other members of the VMI family. The day a cadet receives his or her class ring is one of the most important celebrations in a cadet's life. It is not uncommon for a class to include their breakout date as a feature on their class ring. Most alumni wear their class ring every day for a lifetime. VMI alumni have incorporated their class rings into wedding ceremonies, passed them on to children as heirlooms and generally view the ring as the embodiment of the importance of making it through the Rat Line and becoming a class.

The Rat Line is specifically designed so that no individual can succeed without the help of his or her brother rats. While a multitude of individuals arrive at VMI, a single cohesive class emerges from the Rat Line. That class will persevere for those cadets' entire lives. Those VMI classmates will be lifelong friends, and a lifetime support line. Those tight-knit bonds cannot be created without shared adversity. Decades after graduation, VMI alumni still fondly refer to those with whom they shared the Rat Line experience as a brother rat or BR. The bonds forged on the Rat Line are the rare kind strong enough to last a lifetime.

THE TIE THAT BINDS THE GENERATION

The Rat Line is the common thread that binds all VMI classes to the greater VMI community. Whether a graduate of the Class of 1920, 1980 or 2021, every cadet made it through the Rat Line. While every cadet's VMI experience is different, certain common threads connect all classes. VMI graduates are persons of honor who can be taken at their word. They know that fellow VMI alumni will drop anything to support each other. These bonds arise out of the understanding that every VMI graduate has the character to succeed in the same challenging environment and embodies the lessons learned while at VMI.

The VMI alumni network is one of the strongest and most active of any network in the nation. A handshake between VMI alumni often carries the same weight as a formal written contract.

THE GREAT EQUALIZER



I believe the equality of the graduate of the Institute derives in no small measure from the historical culture of VMI that places all new cadets on the same level in the “rat line” and as they live together through four years in the closes of environments within the Corps of Cadets. This regimen develops individual and collective talents as a class as they learn and grow through the various programs of the Institute.

Maj. Gen. Wins '85, General Order 13, January 21, 2021

VMI matriculants arrive in Lexington, Virginia from all over the United States and the world, from a multitude of backgrounds, perspectives, and ways of life. On the first day of the Rat Line, all differences are erased, the past no longer matters, and all rats equally have to earn the respect of their classmates and upper-classmen through their effort, grit, and determination. At its foundation, VMI is built on an equitable playing field where self-focus and external indicators of success, such as socio-economic status, wardrobe, hairstyle, and transportation, are removed to create a level starting point for every rat. Every member of the Corps—regardless of race, creed, age, sex, socio-economic background, or past experiences—starts on equal footing and must focus on the present in order to succeed. While each cadet will pursue a separate path through VMI and in life—the Rat Line is the same test for everyone.



[S]omething that I learned through the [VMI] system here is that regardless of what your roll or position is, you have a job to do. You're no different than anyone else. No better than anyone else. Just that you do your job – that's it. And I think that's really valuable going into the military and being an officer. It's like, “Okay you're second lieutenant. You're no better than anyone else. You are of no more worth than anyone else.” It just means you have a different job to do than other people.

2nd Lieutenant Jay Forehand, USMC, '19

Part of an individual's rat year includes deep study of facts and quotes contained in a "Rat Bible." Every Rat Bible contains a section entitled "Quotes to Live By." Each rat is expected to live by Thomas Jefferson's introduction to the Declaration of Independence stating that "[w]e hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights..." At VMI, all men and women are measured by their effort and devotion to their fellow cadets, not based on their background or physical characteristics.

TEAMWORK IN THE FACE OF ADVERSITY



It means something to stand shoulder to shoulder with other cadets, facing challenges, meeting objectives, and prevailing together. Much is shared among members of a class – the boredom of guard duty and penalty tours, intense preparation for parades and inspections, late-night study sessions, downtime in barracks. And when the celebrations come – the ceremony to receive your class ring, for instance – you'll find that the people you're celebrating with, your brother rats, are the ones closest to you, who know life as you know it, and who share your values.

The VMI Advantage, 2019

The Rat Line is designed to hold individuals accountable, both independently and as a group. It is not possible for anyone to succeed without the support of his or her brother rats. As a result, cadets learn teamwork and shape lifelong relationships with the cadets on whom they relied. Much is shared among members of a class – the boredom of guard duty and penalty tours, intense preparation for parades and inspections, late-night study sessions, downtime in barracks. Brother rats find their commonality through shared experiences and ultimately shared values.

Additionally, the Rat Line introduces VMI's mentor system. Each rat is paired with his or her 1st class "dyke." The dyke guides the rat through the difficult first year. The dyke explains the expectations and makes sure the rat understands that which is expected of him or her. If the rat faces discipline for the first time, the dyke is there with the rat. Friendships resulting from this partnership often last a lifetime.

These relationships are so uniquely strong because the VMI's Rat Line is so uniquely difficult. This is why applicants seek out VMI. They want to face this unique challenge, and they desire to form the lifetime bonds that are only experienced by classmates who made it through VMI together.

INSTILLING THE STANDARD FOR DAILY CONDUCT



This institution gave me not only a standard for my daily conduct among men, but it endowed me with a military heritage of honor and self-sacrifice.

Gen. George C. Marshall, Class of 1901

The Rat Line is designed to teach:

1. Unity from shared experiences
2. Excellence in all things
3. Military bearing, courtesy, and conduct
4. Self-control and humility
5. Respect for authority
6. Cleanliness, orderliness, and punctuality
7. VMI history and traditions

The Rat Line is designed to instill and reinforce character traits that will serve a cadet well during his or her cadet years and in life after VMI. Success in the Rat Line requires concentration, attention to detail, resolve, and self-discipline. This teaches cadets poise and focus in the face of adversity and prepares them to tackle any challenge they may face in the rest of their lives.

Mary Grace Lemon '14 remembers her first day as a rat. At the obstacle course, she couldn't make it to the top of the rope.

"I couldn't climb to the top. I couldn't yes, 'Hard Chargin' Hotel.' It really messed with me," said the track and field thrower. She remembered thinking, "I'm an athletic person; I should be able to do this."

The Rat Crucible came a few short (or long, for those in the Rat Line) days later. After completing several other physical challenges, Lemon found herself again facing the rope. This time, she made it to the top and yelled, "Had Chargin' Hotel!"

Lemon saw this improvement just nine days into her cadetship. After seeing what VMI could do in less than two weeks, she started thinking about her future and how much she could grow in five or 10 years. Every time she had doubts about continuing, she would remember, "I climbed the rope. I hit the top."

[*VMI Alumni Network, "Why I VMI"*](#)

On May 15, 2021, Cadet Will Duffy '22 ran around the VMI parade grounds for 24 straight hours to raise money for the charity, Operation Enduring Warrior. Inspired by a similar effort taken by his dyke, VMI alumni Emory Lieber '19 several years ago, Duffy logged more than 75 miles in an incredible effort to raise as much money as possible for wounded veterans.

Duffy explained his motivation for the tremendous undertaking: "I don't come from a military family, but coming out of high school I knew I wanted to go into the military. The way I thought about it was, if this is a community I'm going to be a part of, I want to make sure this community is being taken care of." Duffy had to dig deep to find the inner strength and motivation to not stop running, as he put it: "If I feel I can't go one more mile, I can go one more mile, because there have been people I'm supporting right now that have been through way worse than me," Throughout his run, Duffy was flanked by his fellow cadets, and the effort received considerable [news coverage](#).



The demands of cadet life instill qualities of self-reliance, initiative, perseverance, integrity, and self-discipline in each cadet, qualities that allow VMI graduates to succeed at the highest levels in many professions. What cadets learn about human relations, persistence against adversity, and personal values makes a difference to their futures.

VMI places a high value on individual responsibility, and, as a graduate, VMI cadets stand apart. VMI requires cadets to be personally accountable for their actions. Daily responsibility makes discipline a habit and dedication a way of life. Through the Rat Line and four years of compliance with the Honor Code, VMI cadets learn to act with honor in all situations.

Leadership is made, not born.

I have almost completed my cadetship at The Virginia Military Institute. In 22 days, I will be graduating with a Civil Engineering degree. I'm currently on my last ever guard shift as the Night Officer of the Guard while typing this thought. Its 03:41 on a Saturday morning and my shift ends at 07:00. All my hometown best friends at other universities just got done partying or going out to the local bars. After 4 years of being in barracks we've gotten used to "missing out" on a normal college experience. Yet, every now and then I still have the thought on why I came to VMI, even 22 days until I graduate. I just ponder how badly I want to get out of here. I'm thinking on why the hell I'm walking around Barracks in the middle of the night with a flashlight while everyone is sleeping? I just want my life after VMI to start so I can finally have that freedom I'm craving so badly. With all these negative thoughts about this place and wishing time away, you would think I made a wrong decision signing the matriculation book on August 19, 2017. Shortly after feeling sorry for myself, a cadet walks into the guard room with a one-hundred-dollar bill and tells me that he found it by a stairwell. Its pitch-black outside with no one around him and he had every chance just to walk away a little bit richer. I couldn't help but smile, I'm not sure who was listening inside my head, but this was a moment where I was able to look past all the annoying aspects of being a VMI cadet and appreciate the bigger picture of what this Institution upholds. I'm sure that cadet was raised with good intentions, but I know for a 100% fact that any other person at another school in the world would've ran off with that hundred-dollar bill. This is the reason why I became a VMI cadet. I believe that VMI has instilled in him and all other cadets the character and integrity he displayed tonight. I believe its bred into all of us here at VMI. We are taught from day one here on how to lead others. Now more than ever does this country need people like that cadet, they need all VMI cadets. This historical masterpiece of a school has been getting its name slandered by media outlets all around the state. It hurts me to think that people on the outside think VMI allows people to survive here with bad characteristics. A cadetship is no easy journey and VMI has a weird way of ridding the ones who don't display the characteristics and integrity that we here try to instill into every single one who signs that matriculation book. A true VMI cadet supports all race, religion, and gender. VMI is the last of its kind, in my eyes it's the Virginia Military Institute cadets who will shed light on this crazy time we are all living in. Not every person is perfect, and we can't live to think anyone should be, but a VMI cadet is damn near close.

Brady Biller '21, Facebook post from May 16, 2021

LIFE IN THE RAT LINE

The Rat Line and Life as a rat During the first several months at VMI, new cadets are called “rats,” the accepted term (since the 1850s) for a new cadet. You will be part of a tradition and encounter the challenges that VMI cadets who came before experienced—the Rat Line. The purpose of the Rat Line is to assemble a class imbued with honor, discipline, pride, and respect. The Rat Line is conducted in phases of development, employing supporting virtues such as cohesion, humility, physical fitness, knowledge, and self-reliance, while teaching self-control, self-discipline, time management, and followership as prerequisites for becoming a VMI cadet. Even those who matriculate with advanced academic standing or prior military service must go through the Rat Line. To achieve success, new cadets must depend on their mental and physical skills, and the help and support of classmates (brother rats). With persistence and determination, new cadets will get through the Rat Line. It is through the rigors of the Rat Line that the bonds of brother rat spirit are forged. The dyke system is a new cadet’s greatest ally during and after the Rat Line is his or her 1st class mentor, known as a dyke. The phrase originated in the 19th-century mispronunciation of the term “to get decked out,” or to dress up in one’s finery, as it takes two cadets to “dyke out” (put on the white cross belts) for the dress uniform worn at parades. In exchange for certain tasks performed by the new cadet, the dyke offers good advice, moral support, and a haven on the first stoop (“floor”) of barracks. New cadets learn that the dyke, as a mentor, will not allow avoidance of duties, but will help them through the rat year. Normally, the upper-class cadet initiates the contact with a new cadet for a possible dyke relationship. This contact may be based on common background, sports team, or shared hometown with the new cadet, or it may be facilitated by a member of the faculty, staff, or a coach. New cadets are closely monitored to ensure they receive a dyke.

A Typical rat’s Day Initially, new cadets are awakened by their cadre. After classes begin, they learn to wake up in time to get properly dressed, roll up their “hay” (mattress) and complete chores in their dykes’ rooms before Breakfast Roll Call (BRC). At BRC and all other formations, squad corporals (3rd class cadets) inspect new cadets for personal appearance. They then march down to Crozet Hall for breakfast. After breakfast, classes begin at 0800. All cadets must be on time and prepared for class. After Supper Roll Call (SRC) and the following dinner, cadets must be in an approved study area such as barracks, the library, or an academic building. The end of the duty day is signified by Taps (lights out) at 2330 Sunday through Thursday. Saturdays are filled with various activities including military duty and academic meetings. On Sunday mornings, cadets are offered the opportunity to attend services at one of the local churches. On Sunday evenings, VMI’s full-time chaplains hold a non-denominational service in [formerly] Jackson Memorial Hall.