

“Life at VMI During the World War, 1917-1920”

An address delivered by VMI faculty member George Barton before the Corps of Cadets, February 7, 1933. This address appears in the following book

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XLV: LIFE AT V.M.I. DURING THE WORLD WAR¹

1917 — 1920

From the first we have had a clear and settled policy with regard to Military Establishments. We never have had, and while we retain our present principles and ideals we never shall have, a large standing army. . . . We must depend in every time of national peril, in the future as in the past, not upon a standing army, nor yet upon a reserve army, but upon a citizenry trained and accustomed to arms.

—WOODROW WILSON, annual address to Congress, December 8, 1914.

In the fall of 1918, my section room was the room in barracks just over the Arch, which now bears the number 300. Its equipment consisted of a rickety chair and an equally rickety table, a score of noisy folding chairs, and some oilcloth blackboards tacked insecurely to the walls. I shall not soon forget the trials and tribulations caused by those loose chairs, for the cadets, the Third Class especially, always managed to kick over a few of them, accidentally of course, when they were sent to the blackboard.

In this room I taught—or tried to teach—one section the memory of which will abide with me for many years. It was a Fourth Class section consisting of seventeen cadets. Of these, nine were new cadets, Rats; eight were old cadets, Bull Rats. Of the eight Bull Rats, one was a cadet private, three were cadet sergeants, and one was a cadet top sergeant. That, gentlemen of the corps, is one small and very personal view of an overcrowded V.M.I. in the World War.

In the spring of that same year, 1918, every available officer of the regular army was on troop or staff duty. When the time came for the annual government inspection, we were visited by a young first lieutenant of infantry, who had recently entered the army from civil life and, I believe, had never seen a military school until he reached Lexington. At D.R.C. he walked up and down in front of the impeccable rows of immaculately clad

¹An address delivered by Colonel George L. Barton, Jr., before the corps of cadets, February 7, 1933. Colonel Barton was at the time professor of English at V.M.I. and at present (1939) is Headmaster of the Deveaux School, Niagara Falls, New York.

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cadets and gazed wonderingly at his own countenance as it was reflected in the mirror-like toes of many burnished shoes. Finally he turned to the commandant and said, "I haven't seen a boot-black or shoeshine parlor anywhere. Where *do* the cadets get their shoes shined so perfectly?" The silence which followed was eloquent. A little later the lieutenant inspected barracks. He saw room after room containing one square table and four straight chairs. At length he could stand it no longer; turning to his escort, he asked, "But where *do* they keep their easy chairs?" That, gentlemen of the corps, is another view of V.M.I. in the World War.

Just what is meant by a normal year, only an economist can tell, and the technocrats say that the economists do not really know. However, the world at large accepts the year 1913 as the last normal "fo-de-war" calendar year, so I hope I may be justified in going back for a few moments to the academic year 1913-1914 in order to see what sort of life the cadets led before the world-wide upheaval of 1914-1918.

During that session, the cadets of V.M.I. were leading the same peaceful existence as students in other colleges throughout this broad land of ours. No prophetic rumblings of the earthquake and eruption so soon to occur disturbed them and they "kept the noiseless tenor of their way," perhaps never thinking of that other line of Gray, "The paths of glory lead but to the grave"—a line soon to be filled brimful of meaning for some of them and for us who mourn their loss. The world itself had no idea that a great war was close at hand, and statesmen who were interested in the Balkan situation spent much time and effort convincing themselves and others that there could be no such things as a really great war. In the light of what followed, their arguments seem fatuous and inane.

Before following this line of thought any further, however, it will be necessary for me to digress for a few moments and say something about the physical properties of the Institute at that time. In June, 1914, there was not a single building on the south side of the parapet. There was no Scott Shipp Academic Building, no '94 Hall, no Jackson Hall, no Engineering Building. From the mess hall to the Limit Gates there was an uninterrupted sweep of unkept hillside. There was no athletic field—

football and baseball were played on the parade ground. There were no cavalry stables and corral, for the government had not yet established the mounted units at V.M.I. What is now the athletic field and the corral was then an open field at the bottom of which ran a small stream. The first consignment of government horses arrived in July, 1919, during a week of unusually heavy rains. They were turned into this open field which in a few hours was a quagmire; the animals were plastered with mud for days afterwards. Where the north side of barracks now stands, the Francis H. Smith Academic Building then stood, only partially closing that side of the courtyard, and in those days it was possible to drive a car from the back of the library to the quartermaster's office, going between the power house and the east side of barracks. That portion of barracks extending north from Jackson Arch was then known as Jackson Memorial Hall: the ground floor was an auditorium, while the gymnasium was in the basement where are now the Post Exchange and the R.O.T.C. offices. Peter Wray can show you in the Post Exchange storeroom the remnants of the stairway down which the cadets of 1914 used to escort their calic to the hops.

If you will scan the columns of the 1913-1914 *Cadet*, you will find no mention of the approach of war but you will find many interesting articles which will show you that cadet nature, like the rest of human nature, changes but slowly and that the corps of today has many interests in common with its ancestors in the halcyon days before the World War. You will find, for instance, an editorial entitled "Is Our Spirit Dying?" inspired apparently by the fact that at a football game played a short time before, only fifty cadets had appeared to cheer their team to victory. You will find an article setting forth the need of a new gymnasium, especial emphasis being put upon its use as a larger and better dance floor. A little later, Colonel Russell James, the professor of military science and tactics, in a long paper warns us that the public must take heed of the growing spirit of lawlessness and anarchy and disrespect for authority. (Remember that this was half a decade before the adoption of the 18th amendment to the Constitution.) There is mention of a proposed historical handbook of the Institute which should contain a brief account of all buildings, statues, guns, etc., upon the Post

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and was to be sold for the benefit of the Athletic Association. A little later, we find a description of the first wireless in barracks (we did not call it a radio in those far-off days). Some cadet insisted that the rather fantastic arrangement of wires which composed the aerial was really a device to enable the Third Class to ring cowbells at unseemly hours, while others claimed that these same wires were designed to keep the old Academic Building from slipping down the hill into the River Nile. The so-called invasion of Mexico has a few inches of space in these columns, sandwiched in between an editorial on the traditions of V.M.I. and a glowing account of the Thanksgiving hops. It was about this time, too, that the old blue, or furlough, uniform, disappeared from the cadets' wardrobes. A little later the cadets had a fine trip to Richmond to participate in the inauguration of Governor Henry C. Stuart. We learn that B.A. and B.S. degrees are to be conferred upon all graduates instead of being granted only to the distinguished graduates of each class and that the entrance requirements were to be raised to twelve units. It was in this same winter that a new cadet almost lost his life in an heroic attempt to save that of a Washington and Lee student who had fallen through the ice while skating. A few days later a large part of the barracks roof blew off. On St. Valentine's Day, 1914, we learn that the United States Senate Committee on Claims is listening to V.M.I.'s appeal for \$137,000, as a reimbursement for the damage done to the civil property of the Institute by Hunter's raid. (It is now, of course, a matter of common knowledge that the government allowed this claim to the extent of \$100,000 and with this money was built the hall in which you are now sitting.) Those of you who recall that the cadets served as drillmasters for recruits during the War Between the States will find an interesting echo of that fact in *The Cadet* for May 4, 1914, which tells us that cadets may soon be serving as drillmasters for the volunteers who are to be called out against Mexico. It is followed by a partial list of V.M.I. men in Funsten's Brigade, which at that time was patrolling the Mexican border. Last of all comes a description of the final ball. There were *thirty-six* couples, and according to *The Cadet* reporter, the final hops were the *largest and most elaborate* ever held at the Institute.

On June 28, 1914, only a few days after those peaceful final exercises at V.M.I., the murder of the Archduke Ferdinand at Sarajevo lighted the fuse which lay ready: the powder keg which was Europe promptly exploded and within another month the World War was on. For a long time, as you know, the government of the United States attempted to preserve its neutrality and keep out of the conflict which was rocking the very foundations of Europe. But the triumphs of mechanical ingenuity had already annihilated space to such an extent and had so lessened the distance which separates us from Europe, that a policy which might have been workable a hundred years ago was now seen daily to be more and more impracticable, and we were steadily involved more and more in the conflict until, on April 6, 1917, came the actual declaration of war against Germany.

V.M.I. cadets have never been jingoists or militarists. One may read on in the columns of *The Cadet* for several months in the fall of 1914 without finding a single reference to a state of war in Europe, and when one does find that first reference, it will be just a few lines suggesting that a list be made and kept up to date of the V.M.I. alumni who were enlisting in the various allied forces, especially in the Canadian Expeditionary Force. In the meantime, the Institute was following its normal course of life. When the present Jackson Hall was built the old Jackson Hall was rebuilt into an integral part of barracks, and this was accompanied by a gradual increase in enrollment. In 1913-1914, there were 381 cadets in the corps; they were organized as a battalion of infantry of six companies. In 1914-1915, the enrollment was 392; in 1915-1916 it was 391; in 1916-1917 there were 402 cadets in the corps.

Upon the declaration of war in April of 1917, a great wave of patriotic fervor and enthusiasm swept over the country and immediately there was a great demand for citizens who were trained soldiers. Everyone wanted to "do his bit" and institutions all over the country offered themselves to the government to further the nation's welfare. But there is something quite distinctive about an institution like ours; V.M.I. not only has the will, the desire, the spirit to serve but it has the equipment and the organization and its cadets and alumni have the training which enables them to begin serving effectively with the

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least possible loss of time. The sons of V.M.I. can lay down their ploughs and their pens tonight and pick up their swords and rifles tomorrow; they can step from office or warehouse or store into the marching regiment and immediately catch step for, in obtaining an education which fits them for civil life, they have acquired also the education which makes them invaluable in the defense of their country when that country has to go outside its professional men of arms and call upon the citizen to exercise what is at once his privilege and his duty of defending his native land.

Imbued with such a spirit and endowed with its years of experience and tradition, the Institute participated in the country's defense in many ways. A mere list of its activities would be impressive. The first of these which I am going to mention is one by which the Institute, through a few of its officers and cadets, helped the eager but untrained students of a sister institution to render effective service to the nation in its hour of need.

In the spring of 1917, the 400 students of Washington and Lee University were as anxious as any to perform their share in the country's defense, but they were faced with the same difficulty which confronted other civilian institutions—lack of training. Arrangements were quickly made between the heads of W.&L. and V.M.I., in accordance with which an officer of the Institute was detailed as commandant at W.&L.² Several other officers and some fifty cadets were detailed to assist. A battalion of W.&L. students was quickly formed and for the remainder of the spring term these officers and cadets spent four afternoons a week drilling the students. All this was done, of course, without cost to the students or to the University. Most of these student rookies entered the service soon afterward; not a few of them won distinction and promotion at the front and some of them today lie sleeping beneath the soil of France. It is worth noting that the orders detailing the first of these officers and cadets were published on April 9th, just three days after the declaration of war and that this is the first reference to our participation in the war which I could find in the General or Special Orders of the Virginia Military Institute.

Earlier than this, however, when the clouds of war were dark-

²Major Murray F. Edwards, '07, assisted by Captain Willard C. Brown, '14.

ening but before the storm actually broke, the State of Virginia had begun to mobilize her resources for the contingency which with each passing day was becoming more clearly inevitable. As a foundation for whatever defensive measures might be required of the State, the Governor organized a Council of Defense, composed of fourteen of the State's leading citizens, men of finance, business, agriculture, and the professions. It is no small tribute to the Institute that its superintendent, General E. W. Nichols, was appointed chairman and a member of its faculty, Colonel William M. Hunley, executive secretary of a body whose work has since been so highly commended for its valuable services to our State.

In 1917, many men were anxious to secure some sort of training before they volunteered or were called into the service, and here again the Institute was able to supply the demand. With tents which the corps of cadets ordinarily used on their annual hike and encampment, a Camp for Intensive Military Training was set up below the parapet just west of Jackson Hall. An officer of the Institute was detailed as commandant³ and First Classmen were assigned to duty as instructors, some of them giving up almost their entire summer vacation for this duty. Later, an invalided major of the Canadian Expeditionary Forces was obtained as instructor in bombing, bayonet fighting and trench warfare.⁴ Three months training was furnished for the modest sum of \$100.00. There were three successive camps held under these conditions; two in 1917 and one in 1918. They furnished training to a total of 254 men. The records show that almost every man who graduated from one of these camps obtained a commission soon after entering the service. They are not numbered among our alumni, of course, but surely V.M.I. can well take pride in their accomplishments and in the sacrifices which they made.

In September, 1917, the Institute opened the new session with the largest enrolment in its history up to that time. We have

³Captain Henley P. Boykin, '12.

⁴Major Walter Miller, 60th Canadian Expeditionary Forces (from June to September 15th); he was followed by Major Charles Blake, 8th Canadian Expeditionary Forces (September 15th to November 15th). Lieutenant J. J. Champenois, of the French Military Mission, delivered lectures on military matters in Europe in September, 1917; and Captain S. K. Lount, M.C., of the Canadian Expeditionary Forces, came May 11th and continued through the summer camp in 1918.

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already seen that, during the preceding session, the total enrolment had been 402; in 1917-1918 it was 579, an increase of 177. In the following year it again increased, this time reaching a total of 673. We may note, in passing, that this increase in enrolment need not be attributed entirely to the war spirit. If such were the case, the number of cadets in the corps would not have increased gradually after the war, as it had continued to do until the present distressing economic situation had begun to make itself severely felt.

Although there were so many new cadets to be assimilated into the corps in the fall of 1917; although an atmosphere of anxiety and uncertainty enveloped us; although there were many changes in the personnel of the corps during the year since older cadets left at intervals for the camps or the army, yet the Institute routine was to a very large extent maintained. Perhaps the most conspicuous change lay in the early finals of 1918. An Officers' Training Camp was scheduled to open the first week in June, and to this camp a few of the instructors and a large number of cadets who had recently attained the age of twenty-one had obtained appointments. In order that they might reach camp on time, finals was advanced to May 25th-29th.

The routine of mess hall, too, was disturbed. In a proclamation published on January 18th, 1918, the President of the United States called upon the nation to conserve its food supplies in every possible way, that there might be food enough to support both our armies and the allied armies. V.M.I. again shouldered its share of the burden. Nothing made of wheat was served at dinner any day in the week. On Mondays and Wednesdays nothing made of wheat was served at any of the three meals. On Fridays no meat at all was served. There was one meal each day at which no meat was served and no pork was served on Saturdays. Daylight saving time, too, was enjoined upon the nation by presidential proclamation, and from March 30th on, Tom Dulaney's misery whistle used to begin its raucous and unwelcome melody at 5:15 a.m. by the sun instead of 6:15.⁵

⁵Dulaney came to V.M.I. in October, 1902, as bugler and member of the Post Band. In time he took over the task of sorting the cadet mail and his acquaintance with cadets of his time was remarkable. He lived in the Military Store Building and there he died suddenly, while seated in his chair reading on the night of July 15-16, 1928, aged 66.

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In the summer of 1918 it seemed possible that the United States and the allied powers had settled down to a long war of attrition;⁶ plans were made, therefore, looking far into the future. In order that the largest possible number of boys and young men might receive the maximum of military training before being called into the service, the United States Army, with the consent and coöperation of the colleges and universities of the country, instituted the Students' Army Training Corps. The subsequently short duration of the war caused this corps to be abandoned on December 2, 1918, long before its smooth efficient operation could be attained. It was much lampooned by the cadets themselves, who, in their eagerness to get into actual service, said that its initials stood for "Safe At The College," or "The Saturday Afternoon Tea Club." However, I do not hesitate to say that, if the war had been prolonged, this S.A.T.C. would have become a most valuable asset in the national defense. You would perhaps be interested in its operation, but I have time here only to say that cadets (students at civilian institutions) over 18 years of age, who were physically fit, became members of the S.A.T.C., and thereby became, for all practical purposes, enlisted men in the National Army. They could thus be ordered to camps or to the various units of the service as they were needed, while at the same time, they were receiving an education.

It was in connection with this S.A.T.C. that the Institute received one of its greatest compliments from the War Department. At all other institutions, officers of the army were detailed to command this training corps, but at V.M.I., the superintendent was commissioned a major in the Corps of Engineers of the National Army and was assigned to duty here to command the S.A.T.C., while six of our tactical officers were commissioned second lieutenants of infantry and detailed as his aides, to be used as military instructors.⁷ This was a conspicuous recognition of the Institute's contribution to our national welfare in this crisis.

⁶During the war period, 1917 to February 12, 1919, Colonel G. A. Derbyshire, '99, second lieutenant, retired, of the army acted as commandant of cadets; he was succeeded by Colonel K. S. Purdie, '12, who served to September 21, 1919.

⁷V. R. Gillespie; J. M. Mettenheimer; C. C. Cantrell; J. W. McCauley; J. C. Sansberry; and E. R. Lafferty, Jr. Also on Major Nichols' staff were Second Lieutenant Alonzo L. Jones, personnel adjutant; Second Lieutenant C. B. Coulbourn, post adjutant; First Lieutenant L. O. Griffith, quartermaster—Second Lieutenant H. P. Boykin has already been mentioned.

Another distinction was its selection of the Corps as one of the S.A.T.C. were the more conspicuous established at 5 numbers its students men for the Marine asked to furnish once established Corps, a V.M.I.

The presence of the army and marine This was perhaps Marine Unit of in olive drab of Companies, which took the positions forms lasted, or been officially continued as soon as on December 12 the whole corps R.O.T.C., of course

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⁸Captain Benjamin

Another distinction conferred upon the Institute at this time was its selection by the commandant of the United States Marine Corps as one of the fifteen colleges at which marine units of the S.A.T.C. were to be established. The compliment becomes even more conspicuous when one recalls that S.A.T.C. units were established at 500 colleges. One large northern university, which numbers its students by the thousands, was asked to furnish 150 men for the Marine Unit; V.M.I. with its mere hundreds, was asked to furnish 100 men for this unit. The V.M.I. unit was at once established and was commanded by a captain of the Marine Corps, a V.M.I. graduate, who had been wounded in action.⁸

The presence in the corps of the three kinds of uniform, cadet, army and marine, gave the corps a most unusual appearance. This was perhaps most noticeable at dress parade, at which the Marine Unit occupied A Company's position, the S.A.T.C. Unit in olive drab occupied the space normally filled by B, C, and D Companies, while the cadets proper, in their time-honored gray, took the position of E and F Companies. This mixture of uniforms lasted, of course, only a short time. The S.A.T.C. had been officially inaugurated on October 1, 1918. It was discontinued as soon as possible after the signing of the armistice, and on December 12, 1918, there were "make-overs" which reformed the whole corps into one battalion of six cadet companies. The R.O.T.C., of course, has taken the place of the S.A.T.C.

I now turn to a phase of V.M.I.'s participation in the World War which, I say frankly, I approach with a feeling of great humility and trepidation. My admiration and respect for the men who offered, and in some cases gave, their lives for their country is unbounded, and I would fain have this audience share with me that feeling of affectionate regard and honor. Yet the field is so wide and the material so plentiful that I must condense sharply if I am to give you any idea of the whole. Again, I have spent much time during the present session trying to convince a certain small portion of this audience that there are three kinds of liars in this world, and that statistics form the third and worst group; yet I find it impossible to avoid the use of statistics in this presentation. I can only say, in passing, that I challenge anyone to make liars out of these figures.

When the armistice had been signed, and men began to seek

⁸Captain Benjamin A. Goodman, '17.

a return to civil life as eagerly as they had eighteen months before sought appointments to the army,⁹ the late Colonel Joseph Reid Anderson, Historiographer of the Institute, settled down to a labor of love, to the tremendous task of gathering the material for a detailed account of the participation of the sons of V.M.I. in the World War, and it is to his book that I am indebted for the figures which follow.

To the National Army of the United States, V.M.I. furnished 1,048 commissioned officers, and 143 enlisted men, most of whom became noncommissioned officers soon after enlistment. (This figure does not include cadets who did not get beyond the S.A.T.C.) Of these 1,048 officers, five were brigadier generals, 42 were colonels, 49 were lieutenant colonels, 128 were majors, 271 were captains, 265 were first lieutenants, and 290 were second lieutenants. To the Marine Corps, V.M.I. sent four majors, 43 captains, 13 first lieutenants, and 17 second lieutenants—a total of 77 officers to which must be added 37 men in the ranks, making a total of 114 marines. In the Navy, there were two medical directors, one captain, four commanders, 14 lieutenant commanders, 28 lieutenants of both grades, 15 ensigns, 1 midshipman, and 35 enlisted men, a total of 100. In the British and French armies, excluding the men who fought in them but were subsequently in our own forces, were one lieutenant colonel, 2 captains, 6 first lieutenants, 9 second lieutenants, and 9 enlisted men, a total of 27. The grand total in all services, including two Chinese officers and the S.A.T.C. cadets, was 1,832.¹⁰ Remember that only 1,036 men were graduated from the Institute in the thirty years immediately preceding the war.

From these figures, Colonel Anderson, in his book to which I have just referred, has deduced some interesting facts, which I present in his words:

"1. One hundred and ninety alumni were already in service when war was declared.

"2. Not counting these, more than 82 per cent of V.M.I. men between the ages of seventeen and forty, were in the military service during the war, and

⁹The refunds made in the fall of 1918 to parents of cadets who were inducted into the military service amounted to \$32,440; this loss of revenue was offset to some extent by payments from the Federal government for the S.A.T.C. Unit of \$10,187 and for the Marine Unit of \$7,493.

¹⁰Figures of this nature change as new information is received.

"3. Over 78 per cent of the commissioned officers were killed in action.

"4. These ratios show that the military age who were killed in action was less than the military age who were killed in action (determined by the ratio of the number of men required by the Government to the successful ones).

Of these many men who died of wounds received in action or from accidents, 57 deaths were reported. Of these 57, 134 were killed in action behind the German lines, 134 were captured after he had been captured by the British forces, 80 were captured. Eighty Congressional Medal of Honor were cited in order.

If you will take the time to be presented to you, you will realize just how true is the motto: *In Pace*

A few days before the shade of the tree over the field of Congress was heard from today, on November 11, 1918, I went into wild joy, I went to look out over the field of mingled pride and from today." An clouds shall mass the time shall come menaced, and was the spirit of Jack soon to be dyed with pride and sadness: the nation will agree

"3. Over 78 per cent of V.M.I. men in the service belonged to the commissioned personnel.

"4. These ratios are obtained after deducting the alumni of military age who volunteered their services in the Military Establishment, but who were rejected, because of physical disability (determined by medical boards), or because their services were required by the Government in civil pursuits deemed essential to the successful prosecution of the war."

Of these many sons of V.M.I., 22 were killed in action; six died of wounds received in action; 29 died in the service of illness or from accidents which occurred in line of duty—a total of 57 deaths. 134 were wounded in action, and four were captured. Of these captives one was a pilot who was shot down behind the German lines, losing an arm in the fall; another, captured after he had been gassed, was subsequently decorated by the British for gallantry in action on the very day he was captured. Eighty received a total of 127 decorations, from the Congressional Medal of Honor on down. One hundred others were cited in orders for gallant and efficient service.

If you will take these figures in conjunction with the facts presented to you recently by Colonel Hunley, I think you will realize just how fully V.M.I. in the past has lived up to her motto: *In Pace Decus, in Bello Praesidium*.

A few days before he crossed over the river and rested in the shade of the trees, the immortal Stonewall Jackson looked out over the field of Chancellorsville and said, "The Institute will be heard from today." When the armistice had been signed on November 11, 1918, and a war-distracted world turned its heaviness into wild joy, I wonder if the immortal spirit of Jackson did not look out over the blood-stained fields of France and in a tone of mingled pride and sadness say, "The Institute has been heard from today." And if in the future—be it near or far—the war clouds shall mass threateningly upon our country's horizon—if the time shall come again when our soil or our rights shall be menaced, and war shall become inevitable, then I venture to say, the spirit of Jackson will again look out over some green field soon to be dyed with the blood of patriots, and with that same pride and sadness in his voice, will confidently say, "Tomorrow the nation will again hear from the Virginia Military Institute."

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